Chapter-I

INTRODUCTION

The advocates of naive brotherhood object to the notion of a Negro novel. They deny that novels written by American Negroes differ significantly from novels written by other Americans. J. Saunders Reading remarks that the Negro novel is different from mainstream American novel.\(^1\) But Robert Bone observes that the Negro novel like Negro life in America is at once alike and different from the novels of White Americans.\(^2\) While it follows the main historical development of the American novel, it has, in addition a life of its own. Negro novel emphasises racial discrimination. The Negro novelist achieves universality through a sensitive interpretation of his own culture. There is a marked cultural dualism between assimilation and Negro nationalism in the Black artist.

Rooted in African-American slave narratives, songs, abolitionist and assimilationist literature, the African-American novel mirrors the dilemmas and social problems of

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the Negroes in America. From the early folk tradition based mainly upon Southern rural material to the tradition of racial protest, the African-American novel has indeed come of an age in its portrayal of the absurdities of the bitter truths about Negroes. Nirmal Bajaj remarks that African-American novel is essentially a social document which deals with the man and the social milieu. Its goal is to give voice to their social group and community. The African-American narrative presents the culture, belief, patterns, practices and attitudes derived from both the African and American culture, the former based on oral tradition and the latter on written traditions. These transcultural influences form an ambiguous and also an ambivalent force in African-American literature. African-American literary tradition is bicultural as the style, the genre and the narrative forms are influenced by both European and African traditions, the product of mingling of two distinctive traditions. A Black American is a Negro and an American as well. Du Bois calls this bicultural consciousness "a double consciousness", the consciousness of being black and at the same time American greatly modifies the vision, the attitude and the outlook of the

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black American and it shapes his work. Bernard Bell remarks thus:

"Afro-American novel illuminates the experience of black Americans in a formal, imaginatively distinct manner thematically, structurally and linguistically." 4

The African-American writing has its roots in the folk tradition of the African-Americans. Their myths, legends, oratory, music, folk tales, Blues and spirituals and the oral tradition of story telling moulded their fiction. Ralph Ellison maintains that these aspects have humanized the literature of African-Americans. It essentially focuses on the racial exploitation and oppression of the blacks by the whites. These oppressive conditions force the blacks to search for freedom and identity. Robert Stepto remarks thus:

"The Afro-American quest for freedom has been more precisely a quest for freedom and literary— and this dual quest has provided not just a subject but a narrative structure for much of the culture's written literature". 5

Nirmal Bajaj remarks that the African-American novel is a quest for identity, for fulfilment of individual potential.


by merging a divided, alienated self into a truer and better unified literate self.®

In the early stages, African-American literature was essentially a literature of oppression. It later became a literature of protest, it was a cry for the redress and in its recent manifestation, it has primarily become a literature of liberation.

The history of the Negro American writing begins a century and a half after the Black community landed at Jamestown in the English Colony of Virginia in 1619. The Africans were very great story tellers themselves long before they came to Virginia. They had a well established oral story-telling tradition. The earliest writer was Gustavas Vassa who wrote an autobiography The Interesting Narrative life of Gustavas Vassa. Ignoring their own history and culture, the early Black writers attempted at creating a literature patterned upon that of the Whites. Influences from their masters and abolitionist allies pushed the writers toward romanticism instead of "assimilating" white and black cultures.

The early black novelists wrote exclusively within the Romantic tradition and chose melodrama as their principal literary vehicle. They wrote to oppose post-Reconstruction repression. Abolitionist literature left a deep mark on the early Negro fiction. Its form was derived from the popular fiction of the day. It has stereo-typed characterization without round characters. Plot is more dominant than characterization. The early Negro novel is an aesthetic failure. It appropriated an ornate and stilted style from the Genteel Tradition. Robert Bone remarks that it is an incongruous mixture of gentility and protest. Early Negro novel has more sociological value than literary value.

The history of the Negro novel proper begins in 1853 with the publication of *Clotel or The President's Daughter*. It was written to arouse the sympathy for the Abolitionist cause among the English readers. Delany's *Black or The Huts of America* (1859), written in Abolitionist tradition, treats slavery primarily as an exploitative labour system. Frank Webb's *The Griss and Their Friends* (1857) has more in common with the Protest

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Novel of 1890s than with the Abolitionist novels of Brown and Delany. Frank Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892) combines elements of Abolitionism with incipient attack on caste. Walter Stowers and H. Anderson's *Appointed* (1894) and McHenry Janes' *Hearts of Gold* (1896) treat convict labour and segregation as aspects of systematic repression. Slutton Grigg's *Imperium in Imperio* (1899) exhibits the classic attitude of Negro nationalism. But his second novel *Pointing the Way* (1908) exhibits an accommodist spirit. Grigg's vacillation between militancy and accommodation reflects the contemporary dilemma of the Negro intellectual.

Both Chestnutt and Dunbar exploited the plantation tradition. *The Colonel's Dream* (1905) exposes peonage and convict lease system. His novels have more of propagandist value than artistic value. While most of the early novelists were concerned with racial protest, Paul Dunbar sought to amuse rather than arouse his white audience. Dunbar's *The Uncalled* (1898) is his spiritual autobiography. *The Love of Landry* (1900) hinges on the romantic separation of two lovers by class barrier. *The Sport of the Gods* (1902) exposes the demoralizing effect of the urban North on the rural Negro.
W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911) is a political allegory. His social and economic insights far surpassed his artistic powers. His novel is a literary hybrid of the romantic tradition and the protest tradition. James Weldon Johnson is a superior craftsman. His *The Autobiography of an Ex-coloured Man* (1912), written with restraint and artistic detachment consists of episodes which run the gamut of Negro life in America. His works anticipate the Harlem School in its subordination of racial protest to artistic consideration.

The Great Migration Movement of Negroes from 'Plantation South' to 'Urban North' made them come in contact with modern city life. The facing of a strange new experience forced them to revise their traditional ways of thinking, culture and heritage. Harlem became the cultural centre of the new movement. It provided the Negro novelist with an infinite variety of human subjects. There was an upsurge of interest in Negro life and culture. Negro, the unspoiled child of Nature, became the symbol of freedom. Negro writers glorified the primitivism of their lives.

Robert Bone remarks that Harlem Renaissance is a serious attempt made by the Negro artist to integrate his
own group life and discover the hidden value of his folk culture. It reversed the assimilationist trend of the post-war period. Marcus Garvey's Back Africa stirred the imagination of the Negroes. The Harlem School of writers insisted on their artistic prerogatives. They were more interested in interpreting Negro culture than in pleading the cause of racial justice.

Claude McKay is the central figure of the Harlem Renaissance. Cultural dualism forms the central theme in his novels. His novels *Home to Harlem* (1928), *Banjo* (1929) and *Banana Bottom* (1933) are indictments of Western civilization. Langston Hughes' *Not Without Laughter* (1930) deals with the childhood experiences of a coloured youth in a small mid-western town. Counteen Cullen, with his sense of humour and his penchant for satire stands apart from his contemporaries. His *One Way to Heaven* (1932) is an attack on Harlem intelligentsia. Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1932), the most important work of the Negro Renaissance period, moves beyond the naturalistic novel to a higher realm of emotion, to symbol, to myth.

Satire became the prominent literary mode during the Negro Renaissance period. It reached its pinnacle in the

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works of George Schuyler and Wallace Thurman. Schuyler's *Black No More* (1931) is an attack on American racism. Wallace Thurman's *Infants of the Spring* (1932) is a critique of the Harlem Renaissance itself. Some of the writers of the 1920s such as Walter White, Du Bois, Jessie Faust and Nella Larsen known as "The Rear Guard" sought a middle ground between the established tradition of the conservative Negro novel and the radical innovation of the Harlem School. They made the last serious attempt to orient Negro fiction towards bourgeois ideals. Jessie Faust is the most prolific of the Renaissance novelists. Her *Plum Bun* (1924) is a typical 'novel of passing'. *Comedy American Style* (1937) is about a coloured woman's obsessive desire to be white. Walter White's *The Fire in the Flint* (1924) is an anti lynching tract of melodramatic proportion. Du Bois's *Dark Prince* (1928) is concerned with the efforts of a revolutionary group to liberate the dark people from the white rule. Nella Larsen drew materials from the Genteel tradition and successfully infused it with dramatic form. Her *Quick Sand* (1928) is a well constructed novel. Its characterization is psychologically sound and its main dramatic tension is developed with great artistic power. Her *Passing* (1928) deals with the theme of 'Passing'.

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The Great Depression of 1930s had a great impact on the Negro novel. The reckless and gay mood of 1920s was replaced by a new kind of social consciousness. The emphasis is now on social, rather than racial, discrimination. The novels of 1930s displayed greater social realism and presented a balanced view of Negro life. Robert Bone remarks that any exoticism was abandoned in favour of social protest.\(^9\) Arna Bontemps is a traditional figure whose novels bear the mark of the Negro Renaissance and of the Depression years. Her first novel \textit{God Sends Sunday} (1931) is unadulterated product of Negro Renaissance. \textit{Black Thunder} (1936) is based on an abhorrent slave rebellion of 1800. George Wylee Henderson and Zora Neale Hurston turned to South for literary material. Henderson's \textit{Ollie Miss} (1935) is a pastoral set in rural Alabama. Hurston's \textit{Their Eyes Were Watching God} (1937) has immediacy and intensity and at the same time achieves universality. William Attaway's \textit{Blood on the Forge} (1941) focuses on the disintegration of the folk culture under the impact of modern industrialization.

It was during the Great Depression in 1930s that the Negro novel came to grips with the hard realities of city life.\(^{10}\)

\(^9\)\textit{Ibid.}, 118.
life. Richard Wright was the first Negro novelist to approach the life of ghetto in terms of the naturalistic tradition. At the centre of his art lies the impulse to protest. His masterpiece *Native Son* (1940) is not only a work of art in its own right but also influenced a whole generation of Negro novelists. Its protagonist Bigger Thomas has become the most memorable character in Negro fiction.

The post-war novels were variations of Wright and their basic impulse was social protest. They moved towards integration. They tried to transcend the parochial character of Negro experience. But, their works lack a sense of form and thematic line. Chester Himes' *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945) is a story of racial discrimination. Gardener Smith's *Last of the Conquerers* (1948) deals with racial discrimination in American army. Alen Bland's *Behold A Cry* (1947) is a novel of Great Migration with some psychological subtlety.

Some of the novels of early post-war period depict slum neighbourhood as a breeding ground of delinquency and crime. Of these "environist novels" Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946) is prominent. By 1940 the influence of great Depression receded and the tradition of social
realism and naturalism became worn out. Now the war experience became the shaping influence. The revolt against protest literature resulted in the emergence of escapist literature based on fantasy. Frank Yerby uses American experience rather than the restrictive Negro experience. Efforts were made by some of the black writers for integration. Nora Neale Hurston's *Serph on the Suwanee* (1948), William Gardener Smith's *Anger At Innocence* (1950) and Ann Petry's *Country Place* (1950) are the best assimilationist novels of the period. William Demby's *Beetle Creek* (1951) is an existentialist novel whose central characters come momentarily to life.

Ralph Ellison was the most powerful African-American novelist to emerge after the Second World War. His works include the novel *Invisible Man* (1952), *Shadow and Act* (1964), *Going to the Territory* (1981), a number of short stories and essays and an incomplete novel *And Wickman Arrives*. His early short stories display a highly personal approach to protest fiction. The variety of themes in these stories show Ellison's craft of writing. *Invisible Man* is a novel about innocence and human error, a struggle through illusion to reality. It narrates the story of a faceless, nameless, idealistic negro who undergoes a series of humiliating experiences. It is an
experimental novel which searches after a new form for the novel. Ellison exploits African-American folk-lore, blues, fantasy and myth to fictionalize the predicament of the blacks in America.

James Baldwin successfully transposes the entire discussion of American race relations from statistics and sociology to the interior plane. He wrote three novels Go And Tell It On The Mountain (1953), Giovanni's Room (1956) and Another Country (1962). Go And Tell It On The Mountain cuts through the walls of the storefront church to the essence of Negro experience in America. The central event in the novel is the religious conversation of an adolescent boy. It is an autobiographical novel. Another Country is an ambitious novel and is rich in thematic possibilities. The plot consists of little more than a series of occasions for talk and fornication. The novel is set in a Greenwich village. Giovanni's Room explores the question of his male identity.

In the context of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movement, black writing exploded on the literary scene in the mid 1960s. C.W.S. Bigsby calls this period 'Second Renaissance'. Black voices were raised in protest against racism, poverty, war, corruption and sexism. The Black
Power Movement called upon the Blacks to reunite, to reorganize their heritage and liberate themselves. The Black Arts Movement proposed a radical reordering of the Western aesthetic and a separate symbolism, mythology, critique and iconography for the black writers. After years of uncertainty and experiment, the African-American novel came to achieve some stability and fulfilment in the 1960s. Most of the Black writing of the period aimed at the destruction of the double consciousness described by Du Bois. They were influenced by modern European and the so-called "mainstream" American writers and at the same by time the impact of the black literary tradition. So their fiction is shaped by a combination of contemporary Euro-American fictional techniques and African-American folk culture.

Some continued to write in the tradition of social realism and nationalism. Others experimented with new literary forms and modified critical realism and traditional social realism to suit the contemporary literary needs. But, many innovative African-American writers broke away from the stranglehold which literary realism and naturalism held on black American writers. They experimented with different combinations of myth,
ritual, parable, fable, legend and satire in their narratives to comprehend contemporary reality.

Despite the modern formalist view that separates the literary work from objective reality, the appeal of several types of traditional realism is seen in the first novels by the majority of black novelists of sixties. Many of these, such as Gordon Park's Learning Tree (1963), Kristin Hunter's God Bless the Child (1967) and Al Young's Snakes (1970), are bildungsromans, stories about growing up in Kansas, Harlem and Detroit. Some such as Nathan A. Head's Howard Street (1968), Robert Dean Pharr's Book of Numbers (1969) are graphic, naturalistic accounts of the sporting lives of hustlers and whores. Others like Cecil Brown's Life and Loves of Mr. Jiveass Nigger (1969) and Clarence Major's All Night Visitors (1969) are detailed studies of black expatriate and domestic, existential stud types. The novelists followed two types of realism—critical realism and poetic realism.

Some of the novelists such as John Oliver Killens, John A. Williams and Alice Walker explored critical realism for their social, sex and class approach to reality. Killen's Youngblood (1954) and The Coalition (1971) are the best examples of his preoccupation with colour and class.
In Youngblood he portrays the life of a black family in a small Southern town during the Depression. And Then We Heard the Thunder (1963) exploits the black oral tradition to focus on the themes of black awareness and unity. In Sippi (1967) Killens explores the human story behind the impact of the Supreme Court school desegregation decision of 1954. Set in New York, The Children is 'a Black Comedy' which satirizes black Bourgeois Principles. Written in the tradition of realism, John A.William's novels reveal a growing radical consciousness and preoccupation with form.

His early novels The Angry Ones and Night Song (1961) are bitter attacks on capitalism and racism. Sissie (1963) is an exploration of the psychic damage suffered by the modern family. His fourth novel, The Man Who Cried I am (1967) in which his radical consciousness culminates in the theme of radical genocide is an experiment with time structure. His later novels such as Sons of Darkness and Sons of Love (1969) and Captain Blackman explore the themes of armed violence and love as alternatives to American racism and experiment with time structure. His Night Song is a blues story in the jazz mode. Alice Walker's novels are concerned with 'the spiritual survival of the blacks' in America. In her novels she explores the
oppression, the insanities, the loyalties and triumphs of black women. Her first novel The Third Life/Grange Copeland (1970) is about Copeland’s rebirth of self-respect after a youth and manhood of dissolution. Her second novel Meridan (1977) focuses on the abuse of black women. The Colour Purple (1982), less compelling as critical realism than as folk romance, is concerned with the politics of sex and self. It is written in epistolary form.

The theme of black feminism is explored by Gayl Jones in Corregidora (1975) and Eva’s Man (1976) and by Toni Cade Bambara in The Salt Eaters (1980). Toni Morrison exploits magic, mystery and terror for the celebration of beauty, truth and possibilities of life. Her novels exploit poetic realism and continue the poetic and Gothic branches of the African-American narrative tradition. Despite its primarily Caribbean setting, her Tar Baby (1981) is the least poetic and Gothic of her four novels. Her Song of Solomon (1977) is the most ambitious and Gothic novel. The Bluest Eye (1970) and Sula (1973) are novels of poetic realism and Gothic fables about growing up poor, black and female in a male dominated white middle-class society. Her novels are a quintessential blend of realism and poetry, bizarreness and beauty, revelation and lyricism.
Most of the African-American novelists of the sixties continue the synthesis of traditional forms of realism and romance that characterized the beginning of the black American novel in 1853. They continue to tap the roots of African-American culture and institutions - black music, speech, religion and the family. Most of them were influenced by Western and Euro-American writers. They subscribe neither to the old reductive theory of mimesis nor to the new gods of textuality and self referentiality. Some of them moved away from such earlier forms as realism and naturalism. Others exploited traditional narrative modes such as myth and legend. Black modernist and Post-Modernist novelists are not aesthetically alike.

The African-American novelists of the Sixties are deeply concerned with fictive visions that focus on the truths of the perversity of American racism and the paradoxes of African-American double consciousness. They not merely reject the arrogance and anachronism of Western forms and conventions but try to rediscover and reaffirm the power and wisdom of their own folk tradition. While insisting on their freedom as individual artists to choose their own subjects, form and style, the black American novelists of the sixties achieve their distinctive voices simultaneously within and against a narrative tradition of continuity and change.
Some of the black fabulators combine elements of fable, legend and slave narrative to protest racism and justify the deeds, struggles, migrations and spirit of black people. Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1965) is neo-slave narrative based on folk material and Vyry's quest for freedom. Walker creates fiction from the oral history of her family and the recorded history of the nation. It successfully creates character types of general appeal. The narrator of the novel is omniscient and didactic and its structure is episodic. Unlike the conventional slave narratives, the mood of *Jubilee* is not romantic. Earnest J. Gaines' *Catherine Cramier* (1964) treats a young man's return to his rural home and the past from which he and others of his generation have grown alienated in thought, feelings and values. His first two novels *Catherine Cramier* and *Of Love and Dust* (1967) were influenced by Euro-American literary tradition. In his third novel *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971) Gaines draws heavily on the tradition of slave narratives for his reconstruction of the life of a venerable old black storyteller whose personal journey from slavery to freedom resonates with the collective struggle of black people for freedom for over a century. The creation of the character Miss Jane and of the second major neo-slave narrative are Gaines' chief contributions to the tradition of realism in the African-American novel.
In his novels William Melvin Kelley interweaves the histories of Dunford and Bedlow families and their heritage as African-Americans from Africa and the South. Set in a mythical East South Central State in the Deep South, *A Different Drummer* (1962) introduces us to "the African" whose heroic spirit and deeds inform the legend of the African blood. It reaffirms self-reliance and moral courage as imperatives for social change. *Dunfords Travels Everywheres* (1970) focuses on Chig Dunford's quest to discover his own nature and the nature of the world. Its appeal lies in Kelly's effective use of parody and irony. Kelley parodies the characters, structure and style of James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* and the mythology of Eddas in *Dunsford Travels Everywhere*. In giving form to his moral and social vision, Kelley is most original in his Post-Modern adaptation and fusion of traditional modes such as myth, legend and fable.

Like Kelley Ronald Fair is best known for his adaptation of such traditional forms as legend and fable. His *Hog Butcher* (1968) and *We Cann't Breathe* (1972) reveal the continuing appeal of traditional realism and naturalism to some contemporary black novelists. Told by a third person omniscient author-narrator, *Hog Butcher* is the story of Wilfred Robinson's courage in testifying
against police who mistakenly killed his hero Cornbread. Like *Hog Butcher, We Can't Breathe*, a semi-autobiographical novel, reveals the bitter-sweet memories of growing up black in Chicago. Fair's three novellas are more Post-Modern than his novels. *Many Thousand Cane* is clearly related in structure and tone to the fable, legend and the slave narrative.

William Demby's *Catacombs* (1965), a blend of romance and fantasy, stresses the artificiality of reality and the reality of artifice. Some of the black fabulators have experimented with dream visions, stylized characters, and linguistic forms to illuminate the burden of African-American double consciousness. In *There Is A Tree More Ancient Than Eden* (1973) and *The Bloodworth Orphans* (1977) Leon Forrest draws on the symbolic language of the Bible, folk sermon and black vernacular.

Hurry Home is more non-representational and experimental in time structure and Prufrockian in characterization. The Lynchers is the most intriguing blend of realism and surrealism. Hiding Place and Sent For You Yesterday continue Widerman's mediation on the history of his family, home and people. Clarence Major's four novels All-Night Visitors (1969), NO (1973), Reflex and Bone Structure (1975) and Emergency Exit (1979) extend the experimental tradition of African-American novel by their subordination of race and political consciousness to a phenomenological exploration of sex and language as a ritualistic rebirth and reaffirmation of self. All-Night Visitors is the episodic journey of Eli Boltan, a black neurotic Vietnam Veteran. No is the retrospective narrative of the protagonist's growing awareness as a child to his full self awareness as an adult. Reflex and Bone Structure is a parody of conventional detective story.

Some contemporary black novelists employ distinctive combination of fabulation and satire to present their tragicomic visions of our times. Charles Stevenson Wright's The Messenger (1963) is a picaresque novel which chronicles the desperation of the protagonist's life in Greenwich village. The Wig (1968) is a modern fable whose

Despite the differences in their experiments with form and technique sometimes parodying earlier narrative conventions, and sometimes adopting those of the earlier black writers, the contemporary black American novelists are similar in emphasizing freedom of the individual more than of the group, technique more than the message and psychological and cultural revolution more than the social. The contemporary African-American novel has finally universalized itself by merging into the "mainstream" writing and has been able to dispel the stigma of blackness by transforming an experience into a high level of sophistication and refinement. Thematically and structurally from Brown to Reed the tradition of
African-American novel is characterized by the struggle for freedom from all types of oppression, the political, the social, cultural and literary and by the personal odyssey to realize the self and identity and by experiment and innovation.

The post-war period has been variously labelled as the Age of Narcissism, the Age of Anxiety, the Age of Liberation and the Age of Depression. For the most, the American novel has been marked by a conservative stability of form. Novelists like Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud and to some extent, John Updike continued to write traditional realistic fiction with the customary linear plot, recognizable character, definable theme and unity of time and space. Others like John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, William Burroughs, Donald Barthelme, John Hawkes, Robert Coover, John Fowler, William Gass, Ronald Sukenick, Raymond Federman and D.L. Doctrow moved away from mimetic tradition that governed the traditional novel since its inception and improvised new forms and techniques whatever its name Metafiction, Post-Modernism, Surfiction, Parafiction and Fabulation.

The post-war American fiction is characterized by a willingness to experiment/newer forms and techniques. It
has been called "a city of words" (Tanny Tanner), "a wasteland beyond" (Raymond), "a period of radical innocence" (Ihab Hassan) and a literature of disruption (Klinkowitz). It shows that the conventional fictional devices are no longer appropriate to the modern world. Literature can no longer reflect a stable reality, fixed values because the very existence of that reality and possibility of accurately reflecting it are questionable. John Barth in his article "The Literary Exhaustion" says that the novel is faced with the usedupness of certain forms and of exhaustion of certain possibility. He suggested that through irony, burlesque and parody a novelist can revitalize old forms.

Post-modern fiction is influenced by pop culture and mass media. It is marked by "disruptiveness", "discontinuity", "ahistoricity", use of innovative language, subject matter and technique, withdrawal from traditional narrative and character development, use of fabulation and inversion of reality. The boundaries between fact and fiction are narrowed down. Postmodern fiction rejected the traditional novel of social realism with its linear plot, character development and closure. It favours montage and collage for the organization of experience. The 'character' almost disappeared. Other components such
as plot and language have become disfunctional and worn out. Language loses its power to define life. John Hawkes considers the plot, character, setting and theme as the real enemies of the novel.

Post-modern fiction becomes an exercise in the absurd and playful. Irony replaces metaphysics, indeterminacy displaces determinacy and popular culture dethrones elite culture. The absurd, the comic and even the grotesque constitute the very serious view of life. Black humour and ludicrous impulse become the vehicles of expression. A fine parrodic dismantling of existential heroism takes place in an increasingly absurd and mechanical universe.

Postmodern fiction is self-reflexively metafictional and parodic. It neither tries to mirror reality nor reproduces it. It is always double-voiced. It closes the gap between high and low art forms. It instals and then subverts familiar conventions of both elite and popular art. It exploits and at the same time subverts traditional literary canons. It is a complete break from traditional realism and bourgeois rationalism.

Postmodern fiction is ontological rather than epistemalogical, anarchic, chaotic, accepting uncertainty.
and confusion for their own sake. It is committed to the investigation of determinants and the limits and possibilities of language. It is characterised by deconstruction and intertextuality. It transgresses literary genres and plays with them and employs strategies of distancing, demystification, eclecticism, cult of pastiche and superimposing of one text over the other. In Bakhtin's words, it is a 'Carnivalization' which includes indeterminacy, fragmentation, deconstruction, the comic or absurd ethics, polyphony and performance.

The social context of postmodern fiction is popular culture and hence it revives popular cultural forms. It undermines linear succession of events and relies on juxtaposition of events and random ordering of bits of plot. Narrative is not telelogical but circular. It prefers open endings. In the place of single point of view, there is a multiplication of narrative stances which lead to self reflexivity. Relationships between people, things and events are generally viewed from multiple merging or dissolving points of view. Character is fragmented and not treated as a unified self or entity.

Postmodern fiction is a carnivalesque interweaving of styles, voices and registers which disrupts the hierarchy
of literary genres. It can be defined as a riotous cacophony of conflicting discourses. It uses fantasy and myth as means of comprehending reality. It violates conventions of genre and decorum. It represents the flowering of menippean satire, a seriocomic genre that mixes modes and comprehends multiple styles and voices. The indeterminacy and non-closure that the Post-Modern fiction prefers invites reader's response and so the reader plays a significant role in Post-Modern novels. The goal of the Post-Modern fiction is to make the reader no longer a consumer but a producer of text. To this extent, Ishmael Reed provides an important and major continuity and juxtaposition between the "Mainstream" Post-modern and contemporary Black fiction, after the 1960's phase called "art phase".

Ishmael Reed, a prominent contemporary African-American writer, was born in Chattanooga Tennessee on 22 February 1938. He was the son of Henry Lenoir, a fundraiser for Y.M.C.A. and Thelma Coleman/a homemaker and sales lady. Later in thirties Reed's mother married Bennie Stephen Reed/an auto worker. In 1942 Reed moved with his mother to Buffalo, New York where his mother found employment in various wartime industries. He lived in Buffalo for twenty years where he attended public
schools. He studied at Buffalo Technical High School and later at East High School where he graduated in 1956. During this period he wrote stories based on fairy tales.

Reed began his college education as an evening student at the University of Buffalo's night school division Millord Fillmore College, supporting himself as a clerk in the Buffalo Public Library system during the day.

Reed wrote his way out of the second class status of night school into the Standard Bachelor of Arts curriculum of the University of Buffalo. At college he wrote a satirical short story "Something Pure" which depicts the second coming of Jesus as an advertising agent. It reflects Reed's extraordinary gifts of story-telling and parody and it serves as model for his first novel *The Free-lance Pallbearers*. While a student at the University between 1951 and 1960, Reed was influenced by several professors in Buffalo's Department of American Studies, especially Lyle Glazer, Terrence Hankes in English Department and Gregoryn Trager and Henry Lee Smith, two linguists who helped him to understand the potential of African-American vernacular as a mode of literary discourse.
Reed withdrew from the University in 1960 because of a dire shortage of funds and a wide gap between social classes and took residence in Buffalo's notorious Tallbert Mall Project in order to define himself against the artificial social and class distinctions that he associated with American University education. Reed wrote Ethan Booker, a full length play about a black Puritanical college Professor who was confronting the militants in 1960s.

Reed began his professional career with a newspaper serving as a staff correspondent with Empire Star Weekly. During the summer of 1961 Reed and the editor of the Empire Star Weekly served as cohosts of a radio programme, Buffalo Community Round Table for station WVFO. In September 1960 he married Priscilla Rose. In 1962 Timothy Brett Reed was born. In 1963 Reed and his wife separated and were divorced in 1970. He acted in a number of plays including Edward Albee's The Death of Bessie Smith and Tennesse William's Camino Real.

In 1962 Reed moved from Buffalo to New York city where he lived until 1967. During his residency in New York, he actively participated in several cultural organizations. He served as Editor-in-Chief of Advance...
Reed also participated in the Umbra Workshop, a black writers group that Reed believed began the inflorescence of Black poetry. Reed's New York period was crucial in his evolution as an artist as he wrote his first novel *The Free-lance Pallbearers* in 1965.

Reed left New York in 1967 to assume residency in Berkeley, California. Since 1967, he has taught at the University of California, Berkeley and several other Universities in America. In 1971 along with Steve Cannon and Al Young, he founded the Yardbird Publishing Company. In 1973 he started the Reed Cannon and Johnson Communications Company and in 1976 he established the Before Columbus Foundation. In 1970 Reed married Carla Blank, a dancer. They live in Oakland, California with their daughter Tennessee Reed.

Reed started writing poetry during the early 1960s and associated himself with writers in the Umbra workshop. In his four volumes of poetry he experiments with different techniques transforming the oral tradition captured in the first volume *Catechism of D Neo American Hoodoo Church* into the most formal diction of social commentary in his poem *A Secretary to the Spirits*. *Conjure* contains poems that echo the musical and
rhythmical quality of the black dialect. Although the poems attain lyrical excellence, Reed's anger permeates the poetry. The poems in Chattanooga pertain to the city where he was born and involve the artist recapturing his past. Unlike the social protest poems of Conjure, these poems are personal. The poetry in A Secretary to the Spirit returns to the tone of verbal tirade that characterizes Reed's social protests. In these poems he no longer employs the device of black dialect. In its place is more emphasis on the power of language as social commentary. As a whole Reed's poetry is full of wrathful indignation at white racists and blacks. Darwin Turner remarks that he sings blues, issues prosy manifestoes, narrates ballads and derides the phony with Rebelaisian gusto.10

Reed infuses his narrative poems with a ribald humour. His poetry has jazz rhythmic effects, virtuoso rhyming, hyperbolic imagery and Aesopian understatement. In addition to the liberation of blacks, Reed in his poetry explores black religion. Shrovetide in New and Old Orleans is a collection of articles, essays, interviews,  

book reviews published between 1972 and 1977. In this volume he describes the multicultural influences on his fiction and pays homage to the black artists to whom he feels indebted. The best part of the book is the satire. He also dwells at length on the nature of Vodoun and traces the pattern it assumes in his own work. It is this attention to Vodoun that gives this collection its unity. God Made Alaska for the Indians assembles eight essays and an afterward on environmentalists, Native Americans, race relations and the problems of the multicultural artists. It ranges across contemporary America exposing its monoculture. It deals with the demoralizing state of events since 1976. Reed's penetrating vision make it the new decade's most insightful literary critique of American morals and murals. Carbondale remarks that it is Reed's continuing autobiography of the mind. Writing Is Fighting is a collection of editorials, essays and book reviews mainly appeared in The Nation and The New York Times. In this collection of essays, Reed writes delicately about the vulgarities in American life and thought, especially racism, bourgeois greed, capitalistic

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Ishmael Reed, an original satirist and practitioner of the experimental fiction, is the most widely reviewed African-American male writer since Ralph Ellison. He has been labelled an allegorist, satirist, science fiction writer, Black Aesthetician revisionist, radical chauvinist and traitor. He is not only one of America's most gifted and innovative African-American artists but also the leading promoter of black Post-Modernist writing. Along with Amiri Baraka he is also the most controversial writer. Whereas Baraka's controversy stems from his political ideologies, Reed's source of controversy is his parody of even the most sacred beliefs of the Americans.

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Like Juvenal's *Sixteen Satires*, Reed's texts consist of strident attacks on the vices, excesses and follies of contemporary American society. In an interview Reed explains that his use of satire is well within the African-American literary tradition.

"I use a persistent non-western form of satire. The way the persecuted got back at the exploiters. You see a lot of examples of this in the African-American Masks."13

Reed is perhaps the best satirist since George Schuyler. Charles Johnson observes that Reed is a kind of latter day George Schuyler and Wallace Thurman combined with a little Swift thrown in.14 While Reed's satires derive in part from the works of Rudolph Fisher, George Schuyler and Wallace Thurman, he has no true predecessor or counterpart in the black literary tradition. Nick Aron Ford observes that the most revolutionary black novelist who appeared in print so far is Ishmael Reed.15


In his novels Reed assails repressive aspects of western religion, politics, culture and technology. The objects of his metaphysical attacks are Christianity, Western art and morality, the hypocrisy of democratic ideas, American history and tyrannical myths that shape the American minds. Keith E. Byerman remarks thus:

"Like the black nationalists, Reed castigates, satirizes and vilifies white cultural values."16

He views the dominant white society as excremental, repressive and death driven. Racism invariably forms one of the major themes of his satire.

In Reed the response to racism is not a one-dimensional protest or even energetic name calling. The black-white conflict is placed in an epic context that suggests new ways of reviewing world history and new ways of solving the contemporary problems. Generally, in Reed, the central theme concerns some ancient struggle between competing world views. It is given a historical or mythical dimension and is usually explored through fantasy and surrealism.

Reed’s works show that his fictional concerns are not directed at his contemporaries but at his antecedents. Reed confines himself to focus on not merely black-white dichotomy but he often resorts to lampooning of the black community as well. He aims his satire at Neo slavery—blacks exploiting and betraying fellow blacks, a worse form of slavery expressed through the metaphor Louisiana Red. He combines fabulation and satire, surrealism and caricature, a quality inherited from Ralph Ellison and in this he has affinities with other socially engaged fabulators like Robert Coover, William Burroughs and J.G. Ballard. Reed’s high spiritedness and good humour keeps his satire close to comedy and prevents his black art from sinking into the futility of literary rage. Since the Sixties historians have been reexamining slavery seeking alternative to the traditional concept of objectively deprived slave, deprived heritage and will, and Reed’s novels, in short, find an expression to the alternative perspectives on slavery. What Reed does in his novels is necromancy, redefining, rereading of American past.

Robert Stepto observes that the African-American dual quest for freedom and literacy has provided not just a theme but a narrative structure for much of African-

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The quest motif is dominant in Reed's novels. There is Doopeyduk's quest for freedom and identity in *The Free-lance Pallbearers*, Jes Grew's quest for its text in *Mumbo Jumbo* and Raven Quickskill's quest for freedom from slavery in *Flight to Canada*.

Apart from his satire on Western civilization, Reed's novels are concerned with the received form of the novel, with the precise rhetorical shape the Afro-American literary tradition bears to the Western tradition and with the relation his art bears to his black literary precursors. Henry Louis Gates remarks that Reed is concerned with a process of willing-into-being, a rhetorical structure, a literary language replete with its figures and tropes, but one that allows the writer to posit a structure of feeling that simultaneously critiques both the metaphysical presumptions inherent in western ideas and forms of writing and the metaphysical system in which the blackness of the writer and his experience have been valorized as a natural absence. All his novels are a criticism through signifying of what he perceives to be


the conventional structure of feeling that he has received from the American tradition. Reed's form of satire and parody is an attack on the ways of seeing and representing the content. As with science fiction it reveals the ordering of the myths we live by. Reed's novels are self reflexive and they are almost essays on the art of fiction making.

Reed's novels like middle class churches are formal, improvisational, spontaneous and syncretic. His writings may be linked to the time honoured tradition of pamphleteering, for a pamphlet can be as diverse in form and content as imagination or polemic demands. Reed's fiction does not conform to norms of conventional black fiction or American mainstream fiction. His work does not fit into conventional categories. His work cannot be evaluated by conventional literary standards since the very cultural and literary assumptions on which these standards are based are themselves his primary target of satire.

Reed's art is syncretic and promotes pluralism. He recognizes that American culture has many ingredients and diverse cultures, and this led him into a perspective which can be termed as multicultural. His writings support multiculturism, an amalgamation of perspectives.
and forms and life styles from different cultures, past and present, perspectives from ancient and Medieval Europe, Nineteenth century Haiti and the American old West. He advocates multiculturalism to counter the dominant American mono-culture. In an interview Reed says:

"I use ideas borrowed from other cultures to reinforce my culture. The real black aesthetic is international and multi-cultural".19

Reed admired William Blake and W.B.Yeats who created their own system or revived their own culture and Reed too intends to do the same thing in his works. He also drew inspiration from Haitians and looked to them for models. In his use of folk-lore, myth and African oral traditions he is influenced by African-American writers such as Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston. The celebration of Harlem's night life in Claude McKay, the careful and sympathetic observation of Southern blacks' magic and rituals in Hurston's novels, the philosophical repose in Ellison's legendary account of colour and American civilization had a lasting influence on Reed.

In one of the interviews Reed acknowledges the influence of Nathaniel West's The Dream Life of Balso

19Shamoon Zamir, "An Interview with Ishmael Reed," Callalo' 17.4, 1994; 1143.
Snell and The Wig. 20 Like West, Reed considers mocking to be an essential office of the novelist. His fictional satire shares West's tone, a surface of sophomoric wise-cracks and oversimplified comedy beneath which lies the rage of a born moralist. Reed's commitment to an aesthetic collage, his penchant for the grotesque, his boisterous scatology and his jany lyricism owe much to West's novels. Though Reed seems to assert the primary importance of African experience and art forms, he uses mythologies from European and American sources. His art is syncretic and so it is open to all sources. Linda Hutcheon remarks that Reed's parody draws on both the black and white literary and historical narrative traditions. 21

In an interview Reed says thus:

"My work draws upon both Western and Eastern cultural histories." 22

His work celebrates ancient Egypt, makes use of black folklore, oral culture, urban folklore or street, blues,

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jazz and HooDoo beliefs. Reed draws from popular cultural forms such as radio, cinema, television, vaudeville stage, newspapers, magazines, commercials and cartoons and subliterary forms such as detective story and the western. Jerry H. Bryant remarks that Reed's context is the American popular culture, the political cartoon, the routine of a stand-up comedian, the high jinks of mad comics. Louis Gates observes that Reed's use of sub-cultural literary forms such as the Western mode of film narration and the detective novel are not merely novel devices of telling stories but rather they engage other inherited strategies of narration which become as much a part of people's experience narrated in literature as does the very content of the experience. Franco La Polla remarks that Reed prefers to adopt language and techniques drawn from non-literary fields because only in this method does he see a chance for leaving behind the impasse that the novel as a genre is facing today.


the collaboration of fiction and other fields of art as the direction for New Fiction". In New Fiction the writer collaborates with other fields of art such as music and painting.

The narrative technique of Reed's novel is influenced by contemporary film editing techniques. His novels are highly visual, surrealistic fantasies. He calls his books 'movie books'. He follows the conventions of the fantastic apparitional continuity of modern motion picture whose things are known and unknown simultaneously and revealed without the deliberate logical progression of the written word. In an interview Reed acknowledges his debt to films:

"I have watched television all my life and I think my way of editing, the speed I bring to my books, the way the plot moves is based upon some of the television shows and cartoons I have seen."

Reed learnt from movies a minimum of scenery, the use of present tense and visual techniques. It informs his


scene change, which occur in quick splice fashion. Abrupt shifting of perspectives from person to person, shift from one scene to another without any descriptive markers, use of a succession of discontinuous images, importance given to dreams, temporal distortion, use of the techniques of collage and montage, non-linear progression of events and juxtaposition of fact and fancy—these he derived from films. Hortense J. Spillers remarks that in shifting of time and perspectives, Reed's works are closer in spirit and technique to an American television show. In actuality it is a media event.

Although Reed has studied and respected distinguished African-American writers of the past, he is not influenced by their style or content. In *Necromancers From Now* he finds fault with them for imitating western literary forms and for using "other people's literary machinery and mythology in their work." He questions not only the social reality presented in African-American literature

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but also the narrative tradition itself. So he goes back to African-American oral tradition for inspiration. It is worth noting that something like a canonical tradition has operated within the black culture. Reed's writings constitute acts of disobedience to the authority of canonical tradition which essentially has been restrictive and elitist.

Reed's fiction revises key tropes and rhetorical strategies received from the earlier African-American writers. Henry Louis Gates remarks that Reed's place in tradition is both unique and somewhat ironic because he has chosen to establish his presence as an artist not by repeating and revising but by challenging the formal conventions that these texts share. Reed in an interview asserts that his writings fall "more within the classical African-American tradition".

Reed breaks away from the Western literary tradition and conventions of the novel of social realism and this


break away from Western literary tradition is made possible by turning to the forms of African-American oral tradition. Reed's works with their multiple perspectives and open-ended structures are reminiscent of African dilemma tales. Gayl Jones aptly remarks that the influence of oral tradition is vital on contemporary African-American novel, especially in its freeing from naturalistic bondage. 32

Reed goes beyond naturalism to reclaim the imagination and the conceptual voice inspired by individual acts of intention from an oral tradition that offers elements of magic and the supernatural in its experimental range and scope. His novels resemble the transformational tales which dissolve considerations of time and space. The use of type-characterization which Reed uses is also characteristic of oral tradition. The surrealistic juxtaposition in Reed's novels owes much to oral poetry and blues. Episodic patterns, stories within stories, mingling of fact and fiction, preference for fiction of performance over fiction of contemplation and tranquillity, easy transition in time, linguistic

invention that is found in Reed's fiction is derived from oral tradition.

Reed draws heavily from African-American folklore. Folklore in Reed's fiction on practical level serves to advance the plot, provide structures, defines and raises questions about the nature of society, and on theoretical level it has at its disposal a vast and largely untapped reservoir of African and African-American history, folklore and myth. Norman Harris remarks that in Reed literary folklore can be seen as structured innovation.  

The structure relates largely to historical parallels. The history is rewritten through a process that Reed calls "Necromancy, using the events in the racés' past to comment on the present and prophecy about the future. Through Necromancy Reed offers an alternative view of the Harlem Renaissance in *Mumbo Jumbo* and of slavery in *Flight to Canada*.

In an interview Reed says:

"My work is probably more in the tradition of African-American folk art - including the art of humour, fantasy and satire."  

33 Norman Harris, "Politics As An Innovative Aspect of Literary Folklore - A Study of Ishmael Reed," *Obsidian* 5 i-iii, 1979, 41.

In the earlier writers folklore remained a thing apart, interesting in its quietness, but in Reed, folklore becomes an integral part of the theme and technique of the novels. Reed includes archetypical figures from black folklore in his character portraits. He exploits the trickster-figure of African-American folklore with its infinite potential for entertainment and instruction. The manipulation of language to which Reed often resorts to is at the heart of trickery. Reed's protagonists Loop Garou Kid, La Bas, Raven Quickskill, Uncle Robin and Ian Ball are modelled on trickster-figure. The trickster-figure serves as a structural element that allows for cross-cultural translation or movement. Zamir remarks that the trickster figure is at the heart of Reed's celebration of satire and carnival.35

Reed's praxis as an artist involves countering the hegemonic code inscribed by the master culture with alternative discourse and desire, black dispossession and diasporia. He has directly confronted the mandates of Western realistic fiction and traditional narrative structures. Robert Elliot Fox remarks that Reed wants to

35Shamoon Zamir, "An Interview with Ishmael Reed," Callalo 17.4 1994; 1148.
expunge the presumptive superiority of canonized cultural icons of the self designated master class. Hornstein observes that the psychological and moral dehumanization of slavery, its brutality and corruption are responsible for a black revolutionary literature where the black aesthetic becomes a violent rage against all things Western and White. The radical inversion of Western systems of belief and order that Reed engages in can be termed “mythoclasm”, the drastic demystification of ideological signs that have been turned into false universals.

Reed totally rejects the novel form, a Western literary mode for he believes that “the Western novel is tied to Western epistemology, the way the people in the West look at the world." In his view it is unsuitable to


express the African-American experience and it is conventional, worn out and outdated and no longer serves the purpose. Commenting on the Western novel, Reed in an interview says:

"I think the linear novel is finished. I find it boring now." 40

Reed prefers to call his work "stories" than novels. As early as 1969 Clarence Major, a Postmodern African-American novelist too, reiterated the need for newness and experimentation. He said that he was not sure if the novel form as was then commonly structured and marked was worth saving and he "wanted to do something with novel as form." 41 Gayl Jones too in his 1975 interview expresses a similar view about the novel form. She says that she really thinks of herself as a "story-teller" rather than a fiction-writer. 42


Story telling naturally and historically precedes novel-writing. Reed seeks to reform the imagination to render the soul of a person and tell a story and not write a novel. Fiction is presented as a narration of tales which repudiates the claims of verisimilitude. Story telling or fabulation with the emphasis on artifice rather than on self indulgence describes the performance and power of Reed's works. Fantastic in plot, satirical in tone, colloquial in style, his works appear as the later day trickster tales. Lorenzo Thomas remarks that Reed's works come closer to the original artistry of "the griot", the traditional story teller who teaches and entertains. Speaking of his first novel The Free-Lance Pallbearers, Reed says in an interview thus:

"I wasn't really thinking about writing a novel. I was thinking about telling a story".

Reed violates the arbitrary boundaries and generic distinctions as the first step for the artist to assert his creative freedom. He feels that genre is one of the many capricious restrictions which western culture has attempted to establish as meaningful. He feels that

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43 Lorenzo Thomas, "Two Crowns of Thoth: A Study of Ishmael Reed's The Last Days of Louisiana Red". 2 iiii 8.

generic distinctions foster a kind of literary Jim Crowism. They would fragment what is or should be united, restrict the writer's identity individuality and the freedom to create. Joe Weixlmann remarks that Reed's works move through a broad assortment of literary genres, an emblem of the author's need to be independent of restrictions. In traditional African culture from which Reed derives his aesthetic, there is no rigid separation between prose, poetry and drama. The performance of a prose piece may include poetic pieces, dialogue, music and drama. Some of the contemporary African-American writers such as Ntozake Shange violate generic distinctions. Her novel Sassarafras cypress and indigo (1982) includes poetry, recipe, letters, songs and instruction.

The freedom to mix genres was firmly established in Black literature by Jean Toomer, a writer of the Harlem Renaissance in his masterpiece Cane and Reed is inspired by Jean Toomer's experimentation and innovation. Toomer's free forms combined with his eclectic approach to mythology enabled Reed to create new artistic forms. Reed's Flight to Canada starts with a poem. It is in part drama, part

biography and part histiography. In The Last Days of Louisiana Red the conversation between Amos Kingfish and Andy is cast as dialogue in a play.

Thus, Reed believed that black writing should be free to explore its own cultural sources and define its own forms. African-American literature seems essentially a literature of transition and experiment. Reed accuses New Black Aesthetic critics of their being "against any kind of experimentation in form or content". They wanted the African-American novel to remain as the novel of nightmare and pain. He attacks their prescriptions and their hampering influence on the further evolution of African-American literature. He dismisses their aesthetic as a "goon squad aesthetic" for it is 'Euro-centric'. He calls their approach "a literary Banana Republic approach to things." They have forgotten that "the mainstream aspiration of African-Americans is for more freedom including freedom of artistic expression."45

Reed feels that the Black artist should have freedom, the ability to transcend and to transform reality through

form and he can achieve this perspective by using the forms which are indigenous to African culture and not by imitating Western literary forms. He is of the view that the Black artist establishes his integrity by refusing to abide by these "gray rationist forms". He must deconstruct the old genres and replace them with newer and livelier forms. This insistence on artistic freedom, experimentation and innovation is not new to African-American writing. Robert Elliot Fox aptly remarks that Black literature and Black art have their lineage, their own heritage of experimentation and innovation. The writings of Cecil Brown, William Kelley and Al Young are all dazzling experiments in content and form.

For all the talk of Black Aesthetic, few Black novelists have broken away sharply with the conventional realistic novel. In his attempt to define the nature of Black writing, Reed departs from the path which the White and Black critics have carved for Black writers, namely that of the novel of social realism and protest. This does not mean that he is not concerned with social issues. In fact, he is extremely vocal in voicing social issues.

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especially those of African-Americans. Reed's novels are a reaction to the naturalistic conventions adopted by novelists such as Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston and James Baldwin. His fiction works generally on principles that run counter to any impulse toward verisimilitude. He rejects the near photographic precision of social realism in favour of far more expressionistic form emphasizing performance. Joe Weixlmann remarks that realism, seriousness and "engage" give way to surrealism, hyperbolic comedy and satire.48 Reed's novels in a way shatter the mould of traditional Black American fiction. In his introduction to 19 Necromancers From Now, Reed speaks highly of some of the contemporary black writers who have transcended the limits imposed by the rules of verisimilitude, governed conventional perspectives and the single point of view.49 Mason remarks that Reed's work depends precisely on his significant departure from novel of social realism for its effect.50 Reed has also broken himself free of the conventional self-confessional pseudo


autobiography form used by major Black writers such as Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin. Unlike most black writers whose novels and autobiographical testaments are fire-bombs meant to reduce susceptible White liberal readers to guilty pulps, Reed addresses himself basically to his own people, the black Americans.

Realistic fiction presupposed chronological time as the medium or a plotted narrative, an irreducible individual psyche as the subject of its characterization, language as vehicle to convey social reality and above all the ultimate concrete reality of things as the object and rationale of its description. As part of his rejection of conventional mimetic fiction, Reed avoids detailed characterization, chronological time, single perspective, logical plot construction and other trappings of realistic and classic rhetoric device. In his novels the Black-White conflict avoids the stance of a protest novel for it is skillfully placed in a historical context which undermines traditional positions on the subject. He gives a mythic dimension to the Black-White dichotomy and exposes the social reality through fantasy and surrealism, satire and parody. He resorts to discontinuity, juxtaposition, collage and montage as the effective approach to the destruction of linear chronology.
The feeling that the positivistic basis for traditional realism had been eroded and that reality if it could be caught at all would require a whole new sort of fictional skills led Reed towards fabulation. Robert Scholes remarks:

"Fabulation is not an attempt to turn away from reality but an attempt to find a subtle correspondence between reality and fiction".51

Fabulation is characterized by a spirit of playfulness and the care for form and turns the materials of satire and protest into comedy. Events in the contemporary world are so absurd that Black Humour seems to be the best mode of response. Black Humour presents the materials of satire in a comic perspective. It sees the world as absurd, ridiculous and as a joke. Fabulative history refuses to recognize the distinction between fact and fancy.

Reed's fiction can be called self generative fiction of performance. Jerry Kutnik observes that the fiction of performance aims at conveying the living flow of experience as opposed to analysis and explanation.52


uses myth as structuring device and rejects photographic realism and naturalism and it moves the fiction from a moral level to an aesthetic and formalistic one. It treats language as gesture and literature as performance. The element of fun and play are central to Post-Modern fiction of performance. It conceives a novel as a multivoice performance of several narrative voices.

Reed's fiction can be termed as what Raymond Federman calls 'Surfiction'—a kind of fiction that tries to explore the possibilities of fiction, one that challenges the tradition that governs it, and constantly renews our faith in man's imagination and in man's distorted vision of reality, a fiction that does not imitate reality but exposes the fictionality of reality. In Surfiction all distinctions between the real and the imaginary, between the conscious and the unconscious and between the past and the present are abolished. The plot having disappeared, it is no longer necessary to have events of fiction follow a logical sequential pattern. The fictitious beings are no longer well-made characters who carry with them a fixed identity. Surfiction is devoid of any meaning, is deliberately illogical, irrational, unrealistic and incoherent.

Reed uses parody as a critique of realism and earlier trends in literary history. It is a technique of stylistic imitation and distortion. It is a device of incongruous imitation and deflamatory treatment of serious themes for satiric purpose. It is an imitation which strives toward a comic effect. It can be seen as a stylization, a vehicle for reinterpretation and revaluation. It fuses creation and critique. The parodist proceeds by imitating as closely as possible the formal conventions of the work being parodied in matters of style and structure. Parody is a perfect Post-Modernist form for it parodically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies. Linda Hutcheon remarks that it is out of the dualistic tension between adopting of accepted conventions of the genre and violation of it that the Postmodern discourse emerge.54

In Post-Modernism, parody is replaced by pastiche, a random carnivalization of all the styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusions. Parody has become the most ideal and effective of strategies of the ex-centrics, of blacks, of all those who are marginalized by dominant

ideology, trying to come to terms with and to respond critically and creatively to the dominant White culture. Louis Gates remarks that signifying, the use of repetition and renewal, constitutes an implicit parody and it is used as a rhetorical strategy in the African-American narrative tradition, especially by Reed. Reed signifies upon Ellison's Modernism, which, in turn signifies upon Wright's naturalism. His relation to earlier writers is double-voiced. In his novels, Reed criticises through signifying what he perceives to be conventional structure of feeling that he received from the African-American literary tradition.

It is the inappropriateness of Anglo-American forms and imitative Black writing that leads Reed to burlesque and parody the conventional literary modes. He follows certain conventions of the genre he parodies and at the same time, in certain respects, he violates the conventional norms. Robert Murry Davies remarks:

"The complimentary interaction between the underlying received structure and the writer's inventiveness is central to Reed's narrative art."56


Reed's use of parody leads to intertextual relationships. His parodic intertextuality has an impact on both formal and ideological level. Reed's *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* is a parody of the self confessional autobiography, *Yellow Back Radio Broke Down* a parody of the Western, *Mumbo Jumbo* and *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* a parody of the detective story, *Flight to Canada* a parody of the slave narrative and *The Terrible Twos* and *The Terrible Threes* a parody of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. Reed successfully blends his parodic and satiric intentions. Lizabeth Paravisini remarks that, in Reed, parody, which is usually restricted to the imitation and distortion of literary text, becomes medium for social and literary satire.  

The experiences of the Black people in the New world in which they have been forcibly thrust against their will can not be presented in realistic or naturalistic tradition - the pain of the results of three centuries of oppression is too great to be told in a realistic mode. The mythic narrative is most appropriate mode to render the African-American experience. Use of myth lends universality to a work otherwise topical and leads to

intertextuality and inversion. Reed explores life through myth. He invokes classical myths to interpret contemporary social reality. The social experience is always presented so as to reflect a mythic dimension. E.Raja Rao observes that by juxtaposing myth with reality Reed's novels envision a cosmic satire.°

Reed combines history and primordial myth to develop a vision of life which Harry Slochower calls "mythopoesis".°° Mythopoesis is an art form, like 'necromancy', which results from an interaction between the past and the present and speculates the direction for the future. Like the mythic writers of the mainstream literature, Reed has the object of reconstructing the world without prejudice to either Blacks or Whites. He is not interested in pure myth either Black or White. He is interested in recreation and reinterpretation of myths. E.Raja Rao remarks that Reed exploits the mythopoesis mode to encompass his broad vision of history of mankind with the black experience at the centre of it.°°

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In Reed's novels myth functions as the intentional structure of the novel. The plotting of the novel lies not in mimetic faithfulness but in the ordering of mythic form. Myth becomes not only a metaphor for experience but also serves as the very structure of the novel. E. Raja Rao remarks that by combining historical perspectives with mythic perspectives mythopoesis lends structural unity to Reed's work. 61

As part of his rejection of the conventional realistic novel, Reed never resorts to elaborate character description, delicate conjure of setting and social gesture. Reed's characters are vitally different from the

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61 Ibid., 86.
characters portrayed in conventional African-American novel. In his novels Reed does not aim at creating great characters or probe the human psyche. He is not interested in extensive characterization. In an interview Reed says:

"I am not a big man in characterization." 62

Reed works primarily through caricature of type movements and attitudes. Reed in one of the interviews says that his figures are types on the model of African art. He looks for the essential element in a character. He describes his characters as being cartoons when the cartoon is seen as a caricature, a boiling down of a person to the essential element. 63 The caricatures Reed develops to get us to see ourselves, a conventional technique adopted by satirists, develop into metaphors of wide scope and imaginative power. He isolates a character from others by its essential qualities. E.Raja Rao observes that by emphasizing the flatness of character he likens it to a character in a fable. 64 The names of the characters

63Ibid., 133.
always indicate their nature. Though Reed does believe in essences in a developing, changing self the characters in his fiction do not change. He looks for the 'essence' in a person which distinguishes him from others. He attempts to extract those essential qualities like someone "making a doll in West or East Africa. Keith E. Byerman remarks that Reed's types serve the purpose of his satire which is directed more toward exposure than reformation.  

Reed's type characters lack even limited psychological depth. Their personalities reside solely in what they do and say never in an individual style. They all talk alike discoursively rather flatly, and their conversations are always conceptional disputes. Naomi Jacobs remarks thus:

"Dress rather than movement or features physically distinguish them. Embodying impulses not strictly personal they have ideas but no personalities."  

Unlike the characters in the realistic or naturalistic fiction of Richard Wright, in Reed the condition and the feelings of the characters are not


determined by the social environment or material conditions. They are not individualized. They do not grow and show self realization. They are nothing more than grotesque caricature of blackmen and women.

Reed's characters are based on his HooDoo beliefs. Reed in one of the interviews says that his characters are intended to be VooDoo dolls constructed on the basis of generic qualities, dominant impressions, a single feeling. This delivers the character's soul in terms of the caricature, the broad essential strokes that make the characters identifiable to everyone. Some of his characters are the manifestations of loas or spirits in VooDoo. Negative characters like Minnie, Street, Gibson, Arthur Scrille worship Petré loa, a destructive loa as well as the positive characters worship Rada loa, a creative loa. La Bas and Battriville in Mumbo Jumbo are modelled on Papa Legba, a VooDoo loa and Earline on Barrville and Loop Garoo Kid in Yellow Black Radio Broke Down on Bacca Loup Gerou.

Reed's novels display unusual temporality. They exhibit "dystaxy", that is the disruption of linear time.

Traditional conventions of time and space are violated. Chester J. Fontenot remarks that Reed disrupts the traditional African cyclic conception of time with the linear conception of time indigenous to Western culture. Reed disrupts chronological time through the use of anachronism, historicized myth, simultaneous narration and blending of historical and fictional events. Time becomes a modest crazy fluid in Reed's head, allowing him to mingle events in the past in order to work his magic. Events of the plot are not presented in a logical time but they follow one another in juxtaposition. He juxtaposes artifacts from separate periods/eliminating the artificial division of time as in Amos Tutuola's *Palmwine Drinkard*. In Reed, time is telescoped.

The historical sense of time in Reed's discourse is based on the traditional African concept of time where past, present and future merge. In an interview Reed remarks that VooDoo says that past is contemporary and the time sense is akin to the time one finds in the psychic world where past, present and future exist simultaneously. He

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conceives time as a circle of revolving and evolving events, past and present overlap as though they are simultaneous. The narrative structure based on such a special conception of time offers Reed a way to construct historical causes and parallels for the present day events he attempts to write in his novels. It also takes the narrative out of the routine and the dull. His use of multilevelled, discontinuous, episodic time, anamelies, incongruities, anachronism promote the comic effect. It also serves as a means of sharpening his Meneppean satire. The games played with time, character and form serve to point out the deceptiveness of conventional perception by foregrounding its arbitrary nature. The synchronicity of Reed's narrative roots the works in a more contemporary reality. This also leads to the text's self-reflexivity. It takes several simultaneous events seemingly unrelated and arranges them so that they later coalesce to further the ends of the plot.

The anachronic setting in some of his novels does serve as not merely a simple funny backdrop for a minstrel show but it suggests the clustered paraphernalia of the past, present and future which are interchangeable. The disruption of linear time also serves to negate the sense of history as a linear evolution and means of progress.
In his novels Reed playfully stretches language to the farthest limits of meaning while still pursuing an aesthetic discourse that is at once an attack on realistic poesis and a defense of his Neo-HooDooism. The unrestrained artist can endlessly transform reality through a play of language. He constantly experiments with the play of language-forms. James R. Lindroth remarks that Reed organizes his aesthetic discourse around the polar opposites of realistic mimesis and playful artistic improvisation. Reed’s desire to explore the African-American tradition as well as his act of rebellion against the constraints of Western literary tradition is reflected in the language he employs. George E. Kent remarks that Reed’s prose is flexible, easy in shifts of gear and capacity to move on a variety of levels. His style is a conscious style.

Reed’s art is syncretic and he extends the notion of syncreticism into the level and texture of language he uses. He creates a kind of contemporary bathetic language.

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70 James R. Lindroth, "From Krazy Kat to HooDoo Aesthetic Discourse in the Fiction of Ishmael Reed," *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 4.2 (Summer 1984) 229.

whose principle rules of discourse are taken from the streets, popular music and television. He mixes formal language with colloquial language. Reginald Martin remarks that syncreticism as a literary method helps Reed pull together from all existing language levels and discourse possibilities, and thereby create the fictive illusion of real speech. The emotive effect is bathetic, evoking humour. The language he uses mirrors contemporary discourse-structure. Reginald Martin remarks that Reed elicits emotive response from the listener by his use of incongruous mixing of Standard English with dialect and slang. Such an incongruence of the two types of language provokes what may be called cathartic humour through bathetic construction.

In his fiction Reed adopts both verbal and non verbal medium as a narrative discourse. He not only uses iconographic words but iconographic figures, drawings, photographs, symbols to promote discourse. His aim is less to tell a story than to create a new form of language. Reed subverts official language through

72 Reginald Martin, Ishmael Reed and New Black Aesthetic Critics (London; Macmillan, 1986) 73.
73 Ibid., 73.
idiosyncratic spelling, capitalization and word play. He sharpens the subversion and his philosophical rebelliousness with free use of the vocabularies of HooDoo and jazz improvisation. James R. Lindroth remarks that the language Reed locates at the centre of his aesthetic discourse is the improvised language of the rebellious individual artist such as Loop Garoo Kid. Like Baraka, he uses language less as a medium for rational communication than as a way of mesmerizing readers by sounds and rhythms. In his use of language, Reed moves away from Euro-American logocentricism to African-American phonocentricism.

Reed's fiction is distinguished by a dynamic playful language that encompasses a variety of forms of language from Black English Vernacular to White English vernacular to academic English. He combines the qualities of African-American dialect with slang and western jargon and while in the process, raising the former to the literary language, he intensifies the poetic nature of his prose. He repeatedly uses unorthodox spelling which somehow does manage to represent the phonetic value of the correctly spelled word and thereby creates not only a greater

James R. Lindroth, "From Krazy Kat to HooDoo Aesthetic Discourse in the Fiction of Ismael Reed," The Review of Contemporary Fiction. 4(2) (Summer 1984) 206.
rhythmic and poetic force in his prose but maintains a kind of linguistic consistency which often forces us to question the value and logicality of Standard American English.

Reed's mode of writing is essentially a new fanged American tall talk refracted through the hyperbolic declamating style of William Burroughs. Neil Schinitaz remarks that Reed is driven to Burroughs for an anti-English as French novelist Caesaire went to Andre Breton for anti-French. Reed in fact has moved toward a kind of middle English so as to convey a different kind of experience from that of Ellison or Baldwin. Reed's use of English heavily depends upon a specialized idiom and vocabulary and tonality and it comes closer to conveying the sense of distinctive black experience than does the alien language Standard American English. With Reed, the use of specialized language disorients, which is to say, linguistic modes appropriating thematic concerns. He breaks the art-speech of White fiction but fails to evolve a new Black style. No single style or voice emerges. It is more an orchestration of idolects.

In his novels, Reed blends seemingly accurate historical accounts and fictional accounts and characters thereby showing that liberation from arbitrary enclosures which attempt to erect around the writer is essential to explore the full range of human thought and knowledge. He entirely forsakes and moves his text away from the historical. He feels no obligation to a sound historical method. He refuses to confine himself to plausibility in his description of historical events or characters, for he sees all history as essentially fictional. He plays with historical facts and employs free imagination to describe historical incidents. Narrativised history, like fiction, reshapes any material of the past in the light of the present issues—and this interpretation is precisely what historiographic metafiction calls our attention to. Reed ignores, defies, parodies or reorganizes history because he no longer finds it coherent and explicable. History becomes essentially a static realm of endless and absurd recurrences, that is more appropriately a subject of black humour than of sober consideration.

By mixing history and fiction, Reed plays the role of a historical fabulator who seeks to revise history and create a new myth for black history. Reed often substitutes myth for history, thereby emphasizing the
fictionality of history. Reed's sense of history develops from an understanding that historical facts as we understand them are wholly fictitious, propagated by the master-highculture. C.W.E. Bigsby remarks that the intermingling of fact and fiction in Reed is designed like in Pynchon to subvert history from within.76

Reed dissociates himself from classic historical fiction, not for aesthetic reasons alone but because the vision of history propagated by those classical texts ignores the reality of Black people and undermines their culture. He views history as a vast paranoid conspiracy of the White against non-White. Andrew Gordon remarks that Reed views history as a series of cyclic patterns in which the dominant issues are always the same.77 For Reed, history is neither a progressive linear sequence nor a static state but the periodic recurrences of essentially identical impulses, through superficially dissimilar people and events.

Reed's manipulation of historical incidents and characters is based on his Neo-Hoodoo aesthetic principles

and his rejection of Judeo-Christian Western culture. Naomi Jacobs says:

"Reed's historical characters are to use his own VooDoo terminology "Zoombies", corpses animated by a supernatural spirit".  

He trivializes or transforms the political and cultural significance of historical figures such as Abraham Lincoln thus reducing them to comic citizens. He sets the historical characters against fictional characters, which results in anachronism. He maintains an ironic distance from the historical characters through use of caricature or stereotyping.

Reed's humour is fast and uncomprising. He makes fun of both the White and the Black communities. His humour is all-inclusive. Lizabeth Paravasini remarks that in Reed humour is an integral part of the critique of society and fiction implicit with the dialogic nature of parody.  

Rosenblatt views humour as a surviving strategy adopted by the Blacks. The humorous themes and techniques Reed uses are based on Black comedians such as Dick Gregory, Mabley, Flip Wilson and Richard Pryor who use their


79 Lizabeth Paravisini, "Mumbo Jumbo and the Use of Parody," Obsidian II (Spring-Summer 1983) 123.
ethnicity as a source of humorous material. The cultural gap between the Western and the African traditions and the anachronistic use of language are exploited for comic purposes. E.Raja Rao remarks that Reed's model for his humour is Picasso who has claimed his art to have the geniality of African art. Reed rejects all those arts of North Americans who under Christianity have fallen in love with tragedy.

Thematically more important models for Reed's humour are Negro militants such as Rap Brown and Jennifer Lawson whose humour lays bare the artificiality of the adherence to the Judeo-Christian ethics in America. Reed uses Vaudeville stage techniques to make his humour more effective. For this purpose he presents the characters in the form of duo which implies the presence of dual characters one gentlemanly, the other rustic. The combination of the serious with the comic in Reed's novels gives rise to the Laurel and Hardy type of comedy. His humour is based on his exaggeration of certain special traits of his characters.

Reed's works received a positive response from Black critics in Africa. In an interview Reed says that the best review on Flight to Canada came out in Nigeria. But his works received a negative response from Black critics in America, especially the New Black Aesthetic critics, for they fail to conform to their prescriptions. They charge that Reed tries to escape discussing critical and serious social issues. They say that Reed's microcosms being surreal do not easily lend themselves to an identifiable social microcosm. They accuse him of using humour and satire in dealing with subjects earlier by writers entertained with seriousness. They demanded a direct confronting of social issues in serious prose. Addison Gayle criticises Reed for the supposed frivolity and dangerous mythology of his novels. He condemns Reed for his negative satirical treatment of black characters. To Amiri Baraka Reed's approach to serious problems is "flippant and traitorous and brands his use of satire as escapism". Irving Howe remarks thus:

"Reed writes movie books irresistibly recalling humour columns in high school papers. His work is packed with Mad Magazine silliness". 84

He compares Reed's works to "the commercial cooings of Captain Kangaroo".

Though critics charge him with flippancy and escapism, Reed is really serious beneath his on-surface parodic play. The major toast of the African-American tradition the signifying Monkey on which Reed's work is modelled, is comic but it makes a serious point how the weak are capable of overcoming the strong through wit. It is this seriousness that critics have been blind to when they accuse Reed of being trivial. The assumption seems to be that authenticity of experience and expression are incompatible with double voicing or humour. Reed gives a fitting reply to the charges levelled against him when he says:

"My work is also comic but it makes, I feel, serious points about politics, culture and religion". 85


85 Ishmael Reed, Writin' is Fightin': Thirty Seven Years of Boxing on Paper (New York: Atheneum, 1988) 140.
Thus the present work aims at (1) identifying the thematic preoccupations, (2) the structural realization, (3) the creative unification, and (4) finally establishing as far as possible the creative world-view of Ishmael Reed. In any case, Neo-HooDooism appears to be the main issue of his creative and structural imagination. It is at once the centre and compelling drive for his aesthetic imagination. As a narrative technique, it centrally coheres the apparently diverse narrative strands in his world view.

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