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ERASING THE BINARY OPPOSITIONS (?)

THE POSITION OF WOMEN CHARACTERS IN ISHMAEL REED'S *JAPANESE BY SPRING*

Jiří Šalamoun

I. Introduction

The Raven myths of the Pacific Northwest are comic, but they deal with serious subjects: the creation of the world and the origin of Death. The major toast of the Afro-American tradition, "The Signifying Monkey," is comic, but it makes a serious point: how the weak are capable of overcoming the strong through wit. The calypso songs of Trinidad may be comic, but they deal with serious subjects [...] My work is also comic, but it makes, I feel, serious points about politics, culture, and religion. (Ishmael Reed 1988: 140)

ALTHOUGH Ishmael Reed is the author of nine novels, six collections of poetry, and nine collections of essays, not many readers know what to expect when they happen to hear his name. However, the title of Reed's third book of essays, *Writing Is Fighting: Thirty-seven Years of Boxing on Paper*, combined with the passage quoted above, should give one a succinct image of Reed's style, writing technique, and approaches adopted in writing. All of Reed's novelistic endeavours can be encapsulated in the following plot line: a much weaker individual challenges an oppressive force

which negatively influences the lives of many other individuals, the proverbial Others. Through the continuing struggle of the individual, the prime position of this oppressive force is deconstructed, and its power wanes until it ceases to threaten those Others.

Throughout his prolific writing career, Reed has taken on many heavy-weight opponents; and, thus, Afro-centrism, white racism, the European paradigm of the Enlightenment, and the Western literary canon have all been deconstructed in his literary boxing-ring. Since Reed is very careful not just to switch the binary opposition of the Oppressor/Oppressed equation, but also to erase, as best he can, instances of such a system (Hogue 2009: 145), his works have been lauded as a key example of postmodern, multicultural writing. But Reed's later work has been doubted by many who have been concerned with the position of men and women in his novels. Since some critics have pointed out the unbalanced position of men and women in his oeuvre (Hume 1993: 511; Womack 2001: 237), this article will examine the position of women and men in Reed's latest novel, *Japanese by Spring*, in order to discover whether it is aligned with Reed's attempts to erase binary oppositions or not. It will argue that, while the position of women in Reed's early fiction is not in alignment with his attempts to deconstruct binary oppositions, this situation changes dramatically in *Japanese by Spring*, where women hold better positions than men.

But first, I will summarise the position of women in Reed's early, seminal works, in order to create a literary backdrop for the main analysis.

II. The Context: The Position of Women in Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* and *Reckless Eyeballing*

Since the mid-eighties, a consistent question marks Reed criticism: how to reconcile the gleefully postmodernist "early" Reed with the bitterly anti-feminist "late Reed." (Andrew Strombeck 2006: 299)

In this part of the article, I will discuss the role of women in two of Reed's texts, *Mumbo Jumbo* and *Reckless Eyeballing*. *Mumbo Jumbo* was chosen because it is the pinnacle of his early works and because it is the most well-known of all his novels. *Reckless Eyeballing* is a case in point of his later writing, which is often perceived negatively, and not only because of its stereotypical portrayal of women: "[*Reckless Eyeballing* is] an instance of the diminution of power his work of the 1980s has manifested, compared to his truly innovative work of the 1960s and 1970s" (Fox 1987: 78). Both novels, thus, paint a succinct literary landscape which introduces the reader to all the types of women characters Reed creates.

Mumbo Jumbo tells the story of Jes Grew, a mystical plague which is "electric as life and is characterized by ebullience and ecstasy" (Reed 1972: 9), a plague that threatens all instances of white hegemonic culture and monotheism personified by the Wallflower order. The plague seeks its "Text" without which it will "strangle on its own ineloquence" (Reed 1972: 34) and fade away.

While writing the novel, Reed drew heavily on Egyptian and Haitian mythology; hence, its characters are often the personifications of various gods and deities (Gates 1988: 221-223). This is important for two reasons. Firstly, the male protagonist, Pa Pa La Bas, is directly related to the Haitian god Papa Legba, who serves as the intermediary between the gods and humans in Haitian lore (Swope 2002: 612, Hurston 1995: 393-97). Although many binary oppositions and (even African American) certainties are erased by the Jes Grew, Pa Pa La Bas's position is never questioned in the novel. Even when he is possessed by another Haitian god, not a single character bothers to exorcise or shun this god away. This is especially interesting when compared to what happens to La Bas's daughter when she becomes possessed by the love goddess Erzulie, who is considered to be the most important *lwa*, or pantheon deity, of Haitian lore.

When Erzulie, who is characterised by "her physical beauty, her barrenness, her focus on erotic love, and the lack of permanence in her relationships with men" (Collins 1996:

140), takes over Earline and subsequently seduces an African American male, Pa Pa La Bas decides to exorcise her, which reveals a serious flaw in Reed's attempts to erase binary oppositions. This is emphasised by La Bas's speech to the seduced male: "You couldn't help yourself. If you hadn't given in to her request she would have killed you" (Reed 1972: 126). The position of Erzulie, which poses a threat to masculinity and has to be eliminated, is in stark contrast to Pa Pa La Bas's unquestioned authority, which he is free to exercise as and when he wishes throughout the novel. As Strombeck observes: "Reed may everywhere deconstruct authority, but he reserves for La Bas authority that he denies [to others]" (2006: 302). Thus, for Reed, it matters little if the most important *lwa* appears in his text, Erzulie is banished the moment she mounts Earline, so that Pa Pa La Bas can dedicate himself to the process of erasing binary oppositions. Banishing Erzulie is a substantial price to pay for the destruction of the Wallflower order and white hegemony.

Reckless Eyeballing was published fourteen years after *Mumbo Jumbo* and just seven years before the publication of *Japanese by Spring*. When *Reckless Eyeballing* went to press, Reed suggested that he had been harmed by the feminists who were running the publicity department of the publishing house, feminists who had supposedly under-promoted another of his novels, *Flight to Canada* (Reed 1978: 231). This incident might have incited him to re-cast the role of the oppressive force, making it a group of feminists. Thus, Ian Ball, the book's male protagonist, fights the Lilith Gang (instead of the Wallflower order), a group of feminists who harm creative African American males by under-promoting their books and by having negative reviews written.

It could be expected that opposition would arise to this oppression, and it indeed does, in the form of a phantom that traces the vilest of the feminists and shaves their heads bare. At the end of the novel, readers are perhaps surprised when they realise that the phantom is, in fact, the male protagonist, who is suffering from split-personality syndrome and is unaware of his own condition.

The novel brought about a strong, negative reaction, which condemned Reed as a misogynist. While some critics defended the novel by saying that “Reed paints a more unflattering portrait of the male African-American artist than can be found in any novel by a black feminist” (McGee 1997: 57), and by suggesting that Reed’s subversion of the feminist movement is only another expression of his fight against oppressive forces, the sense that he is a misogynist was strengthened by the book.

However, one also has to bear in mind that Reed is fascinated with trickster lore and produces complex, multifaceted texts to which one is at a loss to ascribe a fixed interpretation, even to a certain portion of the text. Reed himself suggests this, in one of his essays: “[Feminists] complain about Tremonisha Smarts, of *Reckless Eyeballing*, because, toward the end of the novel, she leaves New York for California, to have babies and to ‘write, write, write,’ which isn’t incompatible with the announced goal of a new generation of feminists: to have it all, a career and a family” (Reed 1988: 149). Surely, allowing the arch-feminist of the novel “to have it all” does not appear a very misogynistic act. Combined with the fact that Reed publishes African American feminist fiction in his publishing house—the Before Columbus Foundation—one again realises that there is more to Reed’s writing than meets the eye.

To sum up, even at the height of his creative process, Reed’s fiction was susceptible to emphasising male roles over women roles (i.e., the banishing of Erzulie) in order to promote deconstruction of white hegemony. Because *Reckless Eyeballing* brought much critical attention, and because Reed’s position in regard to women is rather difficult to decipher, his latest book, *Japanese by Spring*, was eagerly expected to shed some light on this puzzle. The next section of the present article will analyse whether, in this respect, Reed’s approaches to women remain complexly tricksterish, even at the end of his novelistic career, and concludes that they change dramatically in favour of female characters.

III. The Position of Women in *Japanese by Spring*

Like the black bear and the North American wolf, the black male in the United States has been the subject of dangerous myths that often, as in the case of the bear and the wolf, lead people to shoot first and ask questions later. (Ishmael Reed 1988: 145)

At this point, two things about *Japanese by Spring* should not come as a surprise: (i.) the protagonist of the novel is again male, and (ii.) the position of women characters is, yet again, complex, for they are depicted both positively and negatively.

In his continual quest to rehabilitate the position of the African American male, Reed allows the readers of *Japanese by Spring* to peep in on a few months of the life of an African American professor, Charles Putbutt, who is known as “Chappie” to the students of the Jack London University where he works: “While the white students called their other professors Professor this, or Mr. That, they called him Chappie. It took them about a month to recognize him as a member of the human species” (Reed 1994: 12). The diminutive of his name succinctly hints at how much respect Putbutt receives from his students, and from his colleagues as well.

Coming from a family where both parents hold high positions in the United States Army, Putbutt is a disappointment to them, especially since he was expelled from the Air Force Academy because “he had tried to organize a Black Panther chapter among the few black cadets who were enrolled there” (Reed 1994: 4), and because he chose to study and teach literature instead. Since Putbutt received his M.A. from a small college in Utah, he is not perceived as equal by his colleagues or the heads of the various departments, and has to undergo the embarrassment of re-applying for a few hours to teach every year. Hence, the major motivating factor of all Putbutt’s actions is his wish to receive tenure.

In order to do so, Putbutt completely remodels himself and changes from a radical teaching assistant with a huge afro—one who was “addicted to blackness” (Reed 1994: 14)—into the most fervent denouncer of affirmative action on his college campus and the author of a book entitled *Blacks, America’s Misfortune*.

Hence, Putbutt is portrayed as a man with no moral standing: “When the Black Power thing was in, Putbutt was into that. When the backlash on Black Power settled in, with its code words like reverse discrimination, he joined that. He’d been a feminist when they were in power. But now they were on the decline [...] and so for now he was a neo-conservative” (Reed 1994: 48-49). This significantly undermines the importance and authority of the main male character in the novel. In fact, since he possesses neither authority nor power, Putbutt cannot even remotely be compared to Pa Pa La Bas or Ian Ball, and he has no wish or capacity to harm women.

Nevertheless, even in this novel Reed continues to deride feminists; but, since Putbutt is not exactly an apt example of a dominant male character, the attempts at ridicule are more or less of the playful kind. This is apparent in the following scene, where Putbutt comments on *not commenting* on the body of a female colleague from his department:

Her clothes were modest. Chappie never went into details when describing women. The feminist movement had accomplished one thing. Eliminated the need for long and unnecessary and embarrassing descriptions of female anatomy in novels by men. He took a note to remind himself to suggest this as a topic for a future panel at the MLA. (Reed 1994: 27)

Such a light-weight punch thrown in the direction of the feminist movement cannot match with Ian Ball’s feminist chases; however, Reed’s male characters have not left the literary boxing-ring of *Japanese by Spring* quite yet.

What first begins as mere ridicule of Jack Milch—the chair of the English department and also its leading black feminist, especially for his decision to close the department for a day after a woman loses a court case “whose prize was the black man’s genitals” (Reed 1994: 23)—becomes incredibly dark after the reader discovers that the same Jack Milch “had been arrested for keeping his wife and child [in a basement doghouse] for ten years” (Reed 1994: 190). However, this is one of the last attempts, in the novel, to ridicule the feminist movement. Reed devotes much more time to debunking the position of Putbutt than to questioning the radical side of the feminist movement.

This is made clearer when Putbutt’s quest to attain tenure proves unsuccessful, and April Jokujoku, “a firebrand radical lesbian ecologic activist” (Reed 1994: 11), is appointed full professorship instead of him. At this point, Reed allows himself to enter the story as a literary character, only to question the value of Putbutt’s work: “[He] was still trying to get through his book *Blacks, America’s Misfortune* that was so full of the critical jargon and Victorian diction of which some nineties black critics were so fond” (Reed 1994: 129). His wish is to stop talking to Putbutt quickly.

Towards the end of the novel, Putbutt’s character becomes increasingly less important as Reed’s character gains prominence. Reed had already resolved his own issues with radical feminism at the beginning of the novel:

Ishmael Reed said somewhere that he agreed with Norman Mailer’s assessment of *Ms. Magazine*, the headquarters for black male antipathy, as a “totalitarian sheet.” He had been attacked by one of their black house feminists in the January 1991 issue. She said that Ishmael Reed was “the ringleader” of black men who were opposed to black women writing about black male misogyny and that he was calling such black women traitors to the race. Ringleader Ishmael Reed has never called anybody a traitor to anybody’s race and not only hasn’t opposed black women writing about black male misogyny but published some of it. (Reed 1994: 24)

Having countered his opponents, Reed's literary alter-ego is now free to uphold the position of the *normal* African American male who has *normal* relationships with women.

Before moving on to the positive portrayals of women in *Japanese by Spring*, let me stress again that, apart from Reed's vindication of his approach to the radical side of the feminist movement, the only character capable of commenting on the position of women within the novel is Putbutt—the weakest of all of Reed's male protagonist—one whose moral standing is heavily undermined, such that even the author's literary alter-ego avoids him. This further undermines Putbutt's credibility; hence, his remarks about and to women are rendered harmless or forceless.

Up to this point, I have been focusing solely on feminist characters of the novel and how Reed portrays them. Nevertheless, it is essential to state that, once Reed moves away from the feminist realm, he is more than capable of creating strong and positive women characters. This is illustrated aptly in the case of two female characters: Putbutt's mother and Jingo, the ex-lover from his radical youth. Both have or had a powerful influence over him.

The suggestion that Putbutt's mother is a strong woman is echoed several times throughout the novel. She is either described as a "hardworking and disciplined" member of the United States Army, one who makes her country proud of her (Reed 1994: 41), or as a strong woman with a rather peculiar approach to education. When Putbutt is asked if he remembers his mother throwing him into a swimming pool, he responds with the following: "I nearly drowned. Her idea of teaching me how to swim. I haven't been able to swim. I haven't been able to go near a beach since then. I was really traumatized" (Reed 1994: 54). It is obvious that his mother was capable of exerting mastery over her son, and it seems likely she could easily influence him again—had she not (with a touch of Reed's novelistic humour) been abducted by Arab terrorists.

However, as readers later learn, Putbutt's mother is capable of mastering men even in her captivity. She reappears

onto the scene towards the end of the novel, and Putbutt realises that her powers to master men have not diminished:

Later he saw his mother on CNN. She was walking down the stairs of an air force plane. She'd lost some weight. She looked trim and without some of the weight she sometimes carried in her face, beautiful even. [...] They showed some footage of his mother's captors. They were crawling on their knees and kissing the hands of their American rescuers. So relieved were they to be delivered from "that woman" as they said. They'd captured her all right, but shortly after being seized she had turned the tables on her tormentors and they became her prisoners. They had photos of their ordeal. One showed his mother, sitting at a piano, playing "Onward Christian Soldiers," as the terrorist stood, singing. His mother was smoking a cigarette and had a shotgun lying across her lap. She could have taken her freedom at least a year before her release, but she had vowed not to abandon her captors until they become fine Christian gentlemen. (Reed 1994: 202)

Although Reed relies on his trademark wit to craft the extract just quoted, it nonetheless displays a powerful female character, one endowed with far more moral and practical authority than any of the male characters in the novel. This is emphasised, yet again, at the end of the novel, when Putbutt's mother persuades him to leave his teaching profession behind and to go to Japan to translate Japanese materials for her (Reed 1994: 205). Again, a parallel situation can be found in neither *Mumbo Jumbo* nor *Reckless Eyeballing*.

IV. Conclusion

This article attempted to answer the question whether Ishmael Reed's latest novel is in alignment with his credo to erase binary oppositions. It concludes that, while women characters are either easily influenced by men in *Mumbo Jumbo* or mastered by them in *Reckless Eyeballing*, similar

examples of the dominance of female characters cannot be found in *Japanese by Spring*. This is not surprising, as mastery comes, in Reed's novels, hand in hand with the strength of a character. The male protagonist of *Japanese by Spring* is neither strong nor determined to harm women; but, most importantly here, he lacks any desire to do so. Instead, Reed's latest novel introduces women characters who outclass the men—be it April Jokujoku, whose literary skills help her to attain a full professorship instead of Putbutt, or Putbutt's mother, who is not only capable of influencing Putbutt but also her terrorist captors. Since Putbutt's mother is the strongest female character Reed has ever penned, I must conclude that even though Reed strayed from his intent to erase boundaries in *Mumbo Jumbo* and *Reckless Eyeballing*, equality between female and male characters is restored in *Japanese by Spring*.

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Abstract

Ishmael Reed is known for writing original postmodern works which challenge white hegemony and control. His novels are praised not only for a mere deconstruction of such instances but also for erasure of the binary opposition of the oppressor/oppressed equation.

However, although Reed uses his novels to deconstruct said instances of oppression, these attempts have been questioned by some critics who suggest that Reed not only does not deconstruct the opposition of male and female characters but also favours the position of male characters at the expense of female ones.

This article then sets out to answer the question whether the position of women in Reed's latest novel, *Japanese by Spring*, is in alignment with his intent to deconstruct binary oppositions or not. The article concludes that, while Reed is susceptible to emphasising male roles over female roles in his early fiction, in order to promote deconstruction of white hegemony his latest novel is endowed with powerful female characters and successfully deconstructs said binary oppositions.

About the Author

JIRÍ ŠALAMOUN is a Ph.D. candidate at the Department of English and American Studies at the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University. His dissertation examines satirical tropes in the oeuvre of Ishmael Reed that disrupt some of the negative representations of African Americans persistent in literary and cultural spheres. His research interests include the context of the contemporary American novel as well as post-colonial and multi-cultural literature.

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