




## INTERWEAVING SPIRITUALITY, CULTURAL HYBRIDITY AND LINGUISTIC EXPRESSION IN ISHMAEL SCOTT REED'S MUMBO JUMBO

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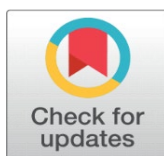
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## ABSTRACT

The prominent African American writer Ishmael Scott Reed's works are known for his satirical and Neo-HooDoo technique in presenting American politics, African people's identity, and historical narratives. The present article examines Scott Reed's framework of spirituality, cultural hybridity and linguistic expression in his novel Mumbo Jumbo. The study highlights African and American's political struggles, their stubbornness in enhancing their culture in a pluralistic literary space, interconnection of myth and spirituality and linguistic expressions. Reed gives importance to spirituality through the major characters and describes how people strive to hold on to their religious beliefs. Reed also describes myth that is interconnected with the Black people's traditions and rituals. This paper explores the effect of spirituality on cultural hybridity. Reed's use of words, rhythm, food culture, zoomorphic language and neologism are considered as prominent in the novel. The main focus is given on the linguistic aspect through satirical diction, parody, and figurative speech.

**Keywords:** Spirituality, Cultural Hybridity, Historical Allusions, Verbal Experimentation, Neo-Hoodoo

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Ishmael Scott Reed is a distinctive writer in African American postmodern literature known for his poems, essays and novels. His writings are mostly satirical, and spiritual in depth with a unique narrative structure. Through his narratives, one can understand that he often challenges the American epistemologies through the Neo-HooDoo approach, incorporating traditions of magic, music, songs, and other cultural practices. His work *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) is not merely a narrative story, but a combination of history, culture, language expressions across various countries and its people.

Scott Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* can be taken as a mythic-historical satire that highlights the spread of 'Jes Grew', a Black expressive culture, and critiques the western cultural supremacy through dancing, music and joyous expressions. He incorporates rhythmic language, and storytelling techniques. His portrayal of 'Jes Grew' symbolizes the uncontrollable spread of cultural creativity. This article explores the intervention of spirituality, cultural hybridity and linguistic expression in Reed's novel. It also highlights how Neo-HooDoo functions through language in the novel. Scott Reed's linguistic expression and spiritual vision are clear through close reading of the novel.

Reed's Neo-HooDoo reference is playful and philosophical that recollects the intersection of myth, history, satire and oral tradition. This novel deploys cultural and historical collage and vernacular speech. Reed exposes that spirituality is inseparable from cultural identity, as well as culture and history are interlinked. This paper argues verbal experimentation through neologism, rhythm and zoomorphic language. It highlights how Reed used allusions and satire as part of the story. He transforms language into a cultural memory and resistance. Reed's use of conventional narrative form is another significant aspect in the novel.

## 2. NEO-HOODOO AESTHETICS AND SPIRITUAL FRAMEWORK

Neo-HooDoo concept is the backbone of Ishmael Scott Reed's fiction *Mumbo Jumbo*, which represents philosophy and aesthetic sense. Neo-HooDoo is a movement framed by Scott Reed based on African-American traditions of Voodoo/Hoodoo and contemporary art. He has used this movement to expose the cultural heritage through rituals, dance and music. [Swathi \(2017a\)](#), [Swathi \(2017b\)](#) states, "Reed illustrates about the experience of an individual when he is in to this plague, by stating what he could listen, see and feel." In this novel, he has primarily used this concept to resist western ideological dominance. This Neo-HooDoo functions as a cultural and spiritual overview of the novels and takes part in literary strategy. It is a belief system rooted in African diasporic traditions. It is highlighted as,

"Almost 100 years ago HooDoo was forced to say

Goodbye to America. Now HooDoo is

Back as Neo-HooDoo

*You can't keep a good church down!"* [Reed \(1996\)](#)

Scott Reed uses this through the Jes Grew notion that embodies the spirit of Black culture spreading through music, dance and stories. These Neo-HooDoo and Jes Grew are framed as contrast belief systems against the western rationalism. Having this root, Reed has set the story exploring the traditional beliefs of Black people and Americans' attempt to eradicate their effort, which reflects the historical suppression. Reed has revealed how African people have been transferred to the New World inherited with a new belief and religious practices of American people, and having felt that Christianity as their oppressors. The concept of Atonists' (Western organization) is "...don't tolerate those who refuse to accept their modes" [Reed \(1996\)](#). In addition to the benefit of Christianity, African people keep longing for their own belief systems, having VooDoo live below the surface, as they cannot embrace the new religious belief completely. [Benoit Battraveille \(1996\)](#) says, "We merely practiced Catholicism up front and VooDoo underground."

"*Mumbo Jumbo* is the story of a life-giving epidemic" says [Shawl \(2017\)](#). Through the novel, Reed demonstrates people's struggle to hold and spread their rituals and beliefs. The novel examines the battle between African belief system Jes Grew/Hoodoo and Western monolithic order Atonism through various characters. [Bonnemere \(2005\)](#) comments, "In *Mumbo Jumbo*, Ishmael Reed goes on with the good fight." The protagonist PaPa LaBas in *Mumbo Jumbo* tries to spread the power of Jes Grew and in search of the sacred book to strengthen the phenomenon. He, along with Black Herman, talks with a publisher, Abdul Hamid, for spreading nonsense thoughts among people through his journal. The Book has been sent around fourteen people for protection measure, because when the book unites with music, the Jew Grew will

be unstoppable. Many try hard to preserve it. This shows the stubbornness of the Black people in reinforcing their root in the western land. "They will try to depress Jes Grew but it will only spring back and prosper" [Reed \(1996\)](#).

Neo-HooDoo functions deeply more political than spiritual. It acts as a cultural resistance against racial, institutional and epistemic control. By portraying this spiritual practice, Reed reinforces the marginalized knowledge systems and the re-entry of African culture that forms a clumsy political situation. He has used Neo-HooDoo as a way of seeing the world through his writing. [Lewis \(2014\)](#) expresses, "Reed's Neo-HooDoo is a vibrant, challenging poetics built in the tensions of life and death, play and restriction, and the individual and state power."

### 3. MYTH, RITUAL AND SEMIOTICS OF LANGUAGE

Myth occupies a powerful place in the novel *Mumbo Jumbo*. Ishmael Scott Reed uses myth and ritual in his novel as a tool to describe tradition and belief of people. Myth is not just a background of the story, but an active force that occupies the whole novel with its code. The spiritual nature of Jes Grew itself reflects myth signifying Black culture rooted in the culture of myth in its performance of dance, music, storytelling and people's life itself. [Harde \(2002\)](#) says,

"*Mumbo Jumbo* destabilizes the angry and bitter 'black novel' with a novel that revels joyfully in symbols of life, music and dance. The novel has the improvisational feel of the best jazz, which remains permeable and elastic as it borrows, shifts, and changes, sounding slightly different with each performance."

Reed has skillfully developed the story by interweaving myth and history blurring the boundary between the two. With this he centres the marginalized epistemologies on the western ideologies. [Swathi \(2017\)](#), "Ishmael Reed in his fiction *Mumbo Jumbo* explains about the atmosphere which is filled with mystery and a mysterious plague which gets in to different places and affects the people in that place."

In *Mumbo Jumbo*, rituals further strengthen the semiotics of language. Jes Grew and HooDoo's practices, their ceremonies, and communal performances function as a way of communication. They communicate with the group or the community in the form of music and dance. Thus they too function as a medium of communication among people which helps in enlarging their culture. In the novel, meaning is often produced not through words but through chants, dances, music and coded speech. This challenges the western Wallflower Order. Through this, Reed focuses on a world of printed word beyond the concept of language. Typography and textual fragmentation reinforce the novel's semiotic play. The age old spiritual text PaPa searches plays a vital role in the story, which represents that the words have the power to stabilize the culture of Jes Grew, in spite of its representatives, who strive to establish it firmly against American notions. He says,

"I'll bet that before this century is out men will turn once more to mystery, to wonderment; they will explore the vast reaches of space within instead of more measuring more 'progress' more of this and more of that." (26).

PaPa LaBas' monologue reveals the mythological and historical roots of Jes Grew. He traces it back to Osiris in Ancient Egypt. Besides this, the conflict between Osiris and his brother Set has been interconnected with the conflict between the African belief system and the Wallflower Order of Americans. Here Osiris represents life, music and dance, and Set represents dominance. Mythology is incorporated in the novel through 'Jew Grew', reflecting Osiris, while the dominance imposed on Black culture by Americans through the Wallflower Order reflects Set, symbolizing control and restriction. In the myth, Osiris was known for his dance. Through his music and dance, he kept his people happy and brought prosperity and peace. The narrator (60) says, "Dance is the universal art, the common joy of expression. Those who cannot dance are imprisoned in their own ego and cannot live well with other people and the world. They have lost the tune of life." Even people sang and played music to make nature pour and bring agricultural prosperity. On the other hand, Set was a crook and a failure. Unlike Osiris, Set hated agriculture and jealous on others. He wished to marry their sister Isis whom Osiris decided to marry. Finally Set married Nephthys. The Black Mud Sound, which refers to the agricultural celebration, spread throughout the land, and people danced and celebrated by singing and playing instruments. Set tried to avoid this music and wandered with lackluster poets. When a problem arose while tilling the soil, an artist informed him that his music had no text, and he had to dance for Thoth, so that the priest could figure out which god it denoted and turn it into a text. His dance for Thoth was transferred into words and put down in his Book of Litanies. This shows the importance of language and text for religion, art, music and dance. But when Osiris was destroyed, Set pursued Thoth and left the book with Isis informing her to take charge of Egypt. Osiris came across cannibalism throughout Egypt and with Dionysus' help, he tried to teach dance and music to thousands of people to

restore the situation. But crooked Set took this situation as favourable and poisoned the mind of Egyptians. This spread around North America and Africa. This mythological story serves as the foundation of the novel's theme. It is believed that the whites along with the Greeks and the Romans are the heirs of Seth and Apollo and the blacks are the heirs of Osiris. Like Set, the Wallflower Order tries to destroy the beliefs of black people on dance, and music that contains Osiris' words.

Ishmael Scott Reed uses the myths of Osiris and Isis in a different context. Osiris is a god of life and hence responsible for cultivation of wheat, barley, grapes and other fruits and grains, whereas Set is described based on his desire for human cannibalism. In the novel *Mumbo Jumbo*, PaPa LaBas spreads this mythology among people and encourages them to follow Osiris. As the text contains the content of Osiris' music and dance in words, he is serious in finding 'The Book of Thoth'. PaPa LaBas is the source of mythical stories and people are wondered of his powers. He (1996, Pg.45) is a "noonday Hoodoo, fugitive-hermit, obeah-man, botanist, animal impersonator, 2-headed man."

#### 4. CULTURAL HYBRIDITY AND HISTORICAL ALLUSIONS

In the novel *Mumbo Jumbo*, Ishmael Scott Reed uses cultural hybridity as another theme. This novel explores cultural hybridity by mixing various cultures which lead to African diasporic experience. This hybridity is the cause of the Africans' survival in the new land. Jes Grew formation is the reflection of African, Caribbean and American cultures. The wide spread popularity of this culture in the form of dance, music and other performances attract many people towards it, which brings its growth against western culture. Partheban and Gangadharan (2026) claim,

"The novel offers insightful alternative perspectives of Western history — including the influence of Afro traditions on Western civilization and the profound impact of Afro American culture on North American culture — while rigorously challenging the ideologies and motives underlying Eurocentric devaluation of Afro culture on the West."

Along with Jes Grew, the Mu'tafikah too actively spreads the works of art which were looted from Africa, Asia and South America. This is another illustration for cultural hybridity drawn by Reed in *Mumbo Jumbo*. His character PaPa LaBas takes the role of a detective in finding Jes Grew's text, and trying to make Black culture expand and protected. Even Earline, a woman is influenced by Jes Grew. PaPa LaBas notices (1996, pg.52) that, "Earline was caught up in the dance, unable to resist the pull of Jes Grew." Berbelang, the leader of the Mu'tafikah, tries to return the non-Western looted art to its real owners. On the other hand, Hinckle Von Vampton takes effort to protect the Western Civilization. "He is an unctuous, grotesque but elegant man who puts on the guise of a 'Negrophile' as he endeavors to save Western Civilization from the Black influence" Reed (1996). These characters represent the cultural hybridity in the novel. Thor Wintergreen, a rich white son of a tycoon, is convinced with the culture of the Mu'tafikah and joins in it. Later Biff Muscwhite convinces him saying how this group attempts to destroy the treasure of Western Civilization. This shows how everyone is conscious in protecting their culture, as well as spread it as possible as they can. Ishmael Scott Reed portrays the unstoppable work of cultural stability in the novel. He proves that suppression of one culture over another cannot survive for a long, as the suppressed culture may emerge at any time which results in a huge transformation. According to Partheban and Gangadharan (2016), "Reed has chosen to establish his presence as an artist not by repeating and reviewing the great black texts in African American tradition, rather by challenging the formal convention."

Cultural adaptability is a resistance, while cultural hybridity is a form of identity formation. Reed's references to mythology, Jazz culture, American culture, Neo-Hoodoo traditions, Mu'tafikah and blending of all these together forms a cultural collaboration. This interweaving exposes that the hierarchies of culture changes according to time. It also expresses that identity, culture and tradition are continuously evolving through communication, especially through language as an important medium. In the novel *Mumbo Jumbo*, Ishmael Scott Reed explores the function of hybrid language in developing cultural memory. Reed combines standard English, slang, musical idioms and ritual speech that reflect the experiences of African and their historical development. Krishnaveni (2011) says, "Ishmael Reed mixes the technique of detective stories, Voodoo, and academic burlesque, providing unexpected visuals, news stories, history and stream-of-consciousness technique."

Historical references in Reed's novel *Mumbo Jumbo* indicate another mode of cultural hybridity. These references interlink history and cultural development in the country. There are many allusions to historical, political, cultural and literary figures and events depicted in the novel, such as Booker T. Washington, President Harding, Charlie Parker, James Weldon Johnson, Marcus Carvey, the war in Haiti, and Prohibition. There are historical allusions to the Bible, the Grail

myth, and Egyptian mythology. Some real life characters included in the novel are Langston Hughes as Nathan Brown, and Carl Von Vechten as Hinckle Von Hampton. The phrase being “Milled and Humed” (68) in the novel is an allusion to the philosophers John Stuart Mill and David Hume. These references to historical figures and events are like anchors in giving historical narratives.

## 5. LINGUISTIC EXPRESSION AND VERBAL EXPERIMENTATION

In *Mumbo Jumbo*, verbal experimentation plays a central part in Reed’s Neo-HooDoo aesthetics. His novel includes African American English, academic diction, and satirical commentary. The use of multiple language form refers to African diasporic culture. Music becomes prominent to his verbal experimentation. His sentence structures, tonal patterns and repetition of words reflect the importance he has given for language. Verbal play is evident through Reed’s use of satire and irony. Reed employs a linguistic style that includes slang, puns, rhyming words, personification, satire, etc. “Mumbo Jumbo provides the clearest example the epistemological function of satire.” [Krishnaveni et al. \(2024\)](#)

### 5.1. RHYTHM

In the novel *Mumbo Jumbo*, rhythm occupies a central view that provides energy to the black musical traditions. Apart from regular narrative style, Ishmael Scott Reed uses repetitions of words, tonal variations and rhyming words which coordinate with the jazz culture of entertainment. “The novel’s title certainly invokes the poem’s frequent refrain, as does its paradoxical use as both the white-inscribed meaning of ‘nonsense’ and the African-rooted spiritual practices of the ‘Mumbo Jumbo Cathedral’.” [Neumeister \(2018\)](#) The repetitions of words in the following lines are the best illustrations for this:

“Boomlay, boomlay, boomlay, BOOM ... Mumbo-Jumbo will hoo-doo you” (49-51)

“Glory, Glory, Glory ... Boom, Boom, Boom” (120-121)

This repetition is a rhythmic device used in the novel, and it enhances readers’ enjoyment. It functions as an ornament in Reed’s writing. Along with this, the poem form in between the narrative adds aesthetic sense to the novel. Reed gives this poetic form through one of Von Vampton’s (1996, pg.158) dialogue as follows:

O Harlem, if you are a sea, why... why  
Dat makes LenoxAve. one of your many  
Swift current, gr^pling me as I  
Beckon to big Black Bucks—lifeguards  
On de sho. Up on de sho O Harlem  
Where jazz is a bather writhing in de  
Sand and claw-snapping crabs do dey  
Duty. Where dippermouthed trumpets  
Summon de tides  
Root-t-toot! Root-t-toot! Root-t-toot!  
And de torn toms play in sea shells  
Da-bloom, Da-bloom, Da-bloom-a-loom

This dialogue form and rhythmic structure contributes to this novel’s texture. Here, rhythm functions as an expression of cultural authenticity and expressive vitality. This energetic text aligns with the life of Black people who feel enthusiastic inspite of their suppressed life. Another example of the repetition of a word with the same meaning in different place in a sentence is quiet evident. “...it will put an end to Jes Grew’s resiliency and if a panic occurs it will be a controlled panic. It will be our Panic.” [Walter Mellon \(1996\)](#)

## 5.2. ZOOMORPHIC LANGUAGE IN *MUMBO JUMBO*

Reed in *Mumbo Jumbo* has used zoomorphic language to describe human, to denote either their characters or to satirize and insult the person. It occurs in different contexts in different situations to point out different people. For instance, Papa says Earline's walking as 'serpentine' (1996, pg.51). The Egyptian people called Osiris 'a bull'. This means that he works in the field for the sake of people without any expectation and brings peace and prosperity. On the other hand, Set treats his wife Nephthys "like a dog, and called her a bitch a tomato a heifer a cow and all other words related to the farming he hated so" (1996, pg.166). Here Set uses certain words related to farming and domestic to insult his wife as he hates her the way he hates agriculture. In a chapter, while the narrator talks about the American Black man's ignorance and his unwillingness to do something after slavery, he calls them as 'crocodiles'. He says, "Until Marcus Garvey came along to rescue the American Negro he was basking in his lethargy like a crocodile sleeping in the sun." [Reed \(1996\)](#)

## 5.3. NEOLOGISM AND CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

In *Mumbo Jumbo*, Ishmael Scott Reed has used innovative language strategy of neologism and culturally significant terms. His usage of words like Mumbo Jumbo, Jes Grew and Neo-HooDoo are not only stylistic and but also meaningful signifying culture of the Black people in the novel. The common meaning of Mumbo Jumbo is meaningless or confusing language, whereas in the novel it refers to a HooDoo practitioner. Likewise the literal meaning of Jes Grew is 'just grew'. But it has been used in the novel as a cultural virus that spreads across Black people. In this way, Neo-HooDoo is a modern interpretation used by Reed to express African spiritual traditions. The prefix 'Neo' represents reinvention and continuity. Reed's neologism is rhythmic and incantatory sound patterns align with jazz aesthetics. In *Mumbo Jumbo*, culture is often signified through food references. "People ate chitlins and pigs' feet and all the things that the Atonists despised" (109). This line refers to the Black Southern foods and folk culture of celebration.

## 5.4. FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

Ishmael Scott Reed has used figurative language in various situations to enhance his writing style and shape his narrative style of *Mumbo Jumbo*. He often uses metonymy, synecdoche, personification, and metaphor. He gives deeper meanings through simple words to reflect the social, political and cultural conditions. The following illustrates this: "The city's head is once more calm" [Reed \(1996\)](#). Here the word 'head' functions as metonymy that represents the authority or leadership. "They don't have the guts of real gangsters" [Reed \(1996\)](#). In this sentence, the word 'guts', the body part symbolizes courage or bravery.

Personification is another figurative speech used by Scott in the novel. "America is born at 3:03 on the 4th of July, Gemini Rising. It is to be mercurial, restless, violent" [Reed \(1996\)](#) Here the American Nation is considered as a human being and its history is commented as 'restless' and 'violent'. "The Book was not going to be their whore any more and gave them the worst of itself" [Reed \(1996\)](#). This is very important sentence as it highlights the text which is considered as a life giving source to the African religion. Here the 'Book' is given human qualities and is described as it will not serve or obey anyone who tries to control it. It represents the theme of resisting cultural domination. The book is personified here as it becomes a source of knowledge which can enhance the power of Neo-HooDoo religion.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Ishmael Scott Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* depicts that spirituality, cultural hybridity and language are inseparable forces in African diaspora. He has combined different aspects in single story, such as history, myth and language expression. His characters and their sincerity in protecting their culture and rituals show their respect towards tradition. His draft of myth and the way he has combined the novel's plot are parallel. He has exposed culture of different countries. As language plays an important role in cultural and spiritual development, Reed has utilized the words and rhythm as ornaments to spread traditional values and religion of African diaspora. By using satire, neologism and historical references, the author challenges western authority. Jes Grew is the religious system that follows a different structure which attracts people through its music and dance power. Reed combines myth, history and spirituality to prove that language has the power to preserve a culture and empower it.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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