



## **Ethnical And Cultural Crises In The Select Novels Of Omar Tyree And Ishmael Scott Reed**

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### **APA Citation:**

Hussain, M.I., Hakeem, A.A., (2021). Ethnical And Cultural Crises In The Select Novels Of Omar Tyree And Ishmael Scott Reed , *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 17(3), 2284-2290; 2021.

Submission Date: 25/10/2021

Acceptance Date: 30/12/2021

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### **Abstract**

Ethnical and cultural crises are the major challenging issues that African-Americans are facing both in the past and present America. They are one of the ethno cultural minority groups in the United States. The humane term “African-Americans” has officially been used to address them. It was after the cold war that aimed at eradicating slavery. After eradication of slavery system, the economically weaker ethnic group preferred staying in America. Ethnicity categorizes them that they have shared culture. It bestows an identity to them as African-Americans. It means that they are holding mixed cultural, traditional and religious backgrounds. They are still considered inferiors due to their impoverished state in the country. On account of their multidimensional inventory; issue of cultural crisis come to light within the group. It leads to communal riots and dissension among them. African American literature evidently witnesses the illustration of these issues being chronicled in their writings.

This paper aims at examining the negative impacts produced as a result of ethnical and cultural crises. In terms of analysing these issues the novels of leading African-American novelists have been taken for this study. They are Ishmael Scott Reed’s Mumbo Jumbo and Omar Tyree’s Leslie. The paper focuses on analysing this major issue in the views of critics and major theorists.

**Key Words:** African Americans, Voodoo Practices, Instrumentalism, Cognitive Dissonance, Western Civilization, Ethnicity and Cultural Catastrophe

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The African-American novel is a reflection of socio-historical, socio-cultural, and socio - psychological aspects in American society. The term African-American literature has generally focusing on the themes of particular issues of black people in the United States. It also reflects such roles of African Americans in the larger American society and what it means to be an American. It can be noted that African - American novels generally explore the very issues of freedom, equality,

justice and humanity which were denied to black people in the United States. These issues are portrayed along with further themes such as African - American culture, slavery, racism, religions, politics, a sense of home and more.

The black American citizens with African descent and bicultural heritage need to face complex relationship with their colour, class, ethnicity, culture etc. The identities of the black American citizens of African descent and bicultural heritage are both product and a process of the complex relationship of their color, class, geography, ethnicity, age, culture, consciousness, conscience, commitment, sexuality and choice. America; being a multicultural country welcomes a variety of immigrants from many countries over the years. It is indefinite that these immigrants are playing a tremendous economic social and political contribution to this country. They have settled there for many reasons, seeking liberty, job opportunities and better life styles, their ethnic differences have enriched their history multicultural activities, knowledge and living styles. Some people have extreme desire in holding the American identity by erasing their native identity, people of Diaspora anglicise their names and suppress their native accent.

Identity describes an individual's characteristics to others whereas ethnicity classifies groups. It is an inevitable source for everyone especially to the person who born to a mixed race parents or the immigrants. Identity of a mixed race person is always contradiction by nature. It is not easy to define the exact identity of a person who holds two different backgrounds. Like the words of Bios they are carrying two-ness, two identities that define their level in America. He strongly advised all the black Americans to be aware of the double consciousness which is peculiar by nature. He believed that every African-American should be conscious of how he sees the world and how the world sees him. In his magnum opus *Souls of Black Folk* he pointed out that American Negroes are having strong mind that keep them never being separated from their culture. The following ideas were conceptualized by him in his book that talks about dual ethnicity of African-Americans.

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (8 Bois)

The theory of ethnicity is based on the three main theoretical approaches. They are primordialism, constructivism and instrumentalism. This study takes the third theory (instrumentalism) that is predicated on the elements of ethnic conflicts within a group. It uses ethnicity as a tool to achieve their goals. Instrumentalists argue that politicians and activists mobilize their own groups to commit violence using them in achieving their goals. An ethnic group is a social group that is constructed by ancestral, cultural and national origin. One of the leading figures in the formation of instrumentalism theory is Paul Brass. The genesis of the theory is referred in his book *Ethnicity and Nationalism* (1991) where he distinctly mentioned about the major idea of instrumentalism. He emphasises about the vital roles of elites in the formation of ethnic groups. The following words delineate his concept: “[e]lites and counter-elites within ethnic groups select aspects of the group's culture, attach new value and meaning to them, and use them as symbols to mobilize the group, to defend its interest and to compete with other groups” (40-41 Brass)

People can get their identities from various sources. Everything gives a kind of source to the people as an identity. It can be given based on one's nationality, religion and even language. In her

attempt to define the term identity and its sources, Kathryn Woodward has registered her views in her book titled *Identity and Difference* (1997), where she says: "Identities in the contemporary world derive from a multiplicity of sources - from nationality, ethnicity, social class, community, gender, sexuality-sources which may conflict in the construction of identity position and lead to contradictory fragmented identities" (Woodward 1). From this point of view it can be concluded that identity is contrary by nature and based on the different sources sometimes it can lead a person to the state of dilemma, when the victim cannot get into an indefinite conclusion.

In the select novel Leslie's and her siblings' identities became uncertain by the intermarriage of their parents. Her mother Anne was an Afro-American by birth who married a Haitian namely Jean. Historically saying the inter clash between African-Americans and Haitians is taking place however their origin is from Africa. The nationality of Leslie and her siblings remain doubtful due to two different national backgrounds of their parents. They could not conclude whether they are Americans or Afro-Americans or Africans or Haitians? Often they have family squabbles among the siblings regarding their exact nationality. There was a clash in the family centred on two different cultures. Clashes have arisen among nationality, religion and language of Leslie and her siblings. They were in a difficult situation to decide about their exact identities. They do not know whether English is their mother tongue or not. Their father's mother tongue was French hence he wanted French to be the central language of the family. They also get confused in terms of following religious practices. Her mother follows Christianity whereas their father follows Haitian religion of Voodoo. These clashes forced Leslie to search for her real identity.

In one such incident of the novel there was a quarrel between Leslie and her brother Pierre over their nationality. He wants to be an American. He did not like his father's way of having dolls and speaking to it (According to Haitian Voodoo religion dead's spirit has power to control). Leslie's mother Anne died of HIV and after the funeral they went to restaurant as a family reunion. Pierre gets annoyed by seeing doll of their mother in his father's hand and he was speaking to it. During their argument Pierre expresses his abominated thought towards this to Leslie as follow: "Whatever, man. We are American. We ain't never even been to Haiti" (Tyree 129). In contrary to this, her sister Laetitia considered herself as Haitian. She liked Voodoo religion and has faith in it.

Culture is a capacity to define characteristic of human kind. It refers to the set of practices that are classified and inhabited by human beings. The way of life of a society (including mannerism, dress code, language, rituals, and customs) is being represented by culture. The term cultural crisis denotes the inter clash between different cultures within a nation that have different types of ethnic groups. Issue of cultural crisis enters the stage, when citizens from different ethnicities exchange multicultural practices. It becomes perilous when one group tries to dominate the other and pretend to show that they are supercilious people. America is a multi-ethnic country, where different ethnic groups are living. The country is known for its vast cultural practices that are being followed by both majorities and minorities. The life challenging cultural crisis remains one of the inevitable issues and a challenge to African-Americans.

Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance helps to understand the typical situation with conflicting attitudes, ideas, behaviour and beliefs. The kind of atmosphere brings in a negative feeling of mental discomfort. Leon believed that the state of dissonance may arise due to cultural mores and past experience. What is wrong in one culture may be a common attitude in another culture. In his attempt of defining the term 'cognition' Leon mentioned the following words in his book.

“by the term cognition ..... mean any knowledge, opinion, or belief about the environment, about oneself, or about one’s behaviour. Cognitive dissonance can be seen as an antecedent condition which leads to activity oriented toward dissonance reduction just as hunger leads to activity oriented toward hunger reduction.” (Festinger 3)

Eventually, the duality within the mind is because of self-contradiction. The contradiction here elevates the battle between the inheritance and the self-acquired. Cultural contradiction arises when the subsequent or the adapted culture dominates over the innate mother culture. A person who stands in-between two cultures will always face many difficulties and negations throughout life.

Laetitia married a man whom she loved. However they have two children, her husband was not loyal to her. She was annoyed and extremely concerned when she became aware of her husband’s had illegal relationship with a woman. She worried a lot about her life and desired to get her husband back. She planned to kill the girl whom her husband loved with the support of Voodoo practices. Generally Americans consider Voodoo as an evil religion, since she was an Afro-American she believed in utilizing Voodoo to vengeance the girl for having illegal contact with a man who was already heading a family. Leslie became tells about her plan of killing the girl by Voodoo methods. Leslie objected her plan and questioned her whether she knew everything about Voodoo practices. In response to her sister’s query Laetitia replied to her in the following way: “You know.... we are Haitian, Leslie.” But Leslie denied the idea and she argued that they were Americans not Haitians. She replied to Laetitia as follow: “We are American, daddy’s Haitian. Ain’t even been there before.” (Tyree 139) From their disputed conversation it can be understood that the siblings have different view regarding their background. They are not sure about their exact identity (nationality).

It seemed Laetitia (Leslie) was adamant in her decision later she went to meet the priestess of Voodoo to make desire true. She entered and was sitting close to the priestess who was doing meditation with eyes closed. Upon seeing Laetitia’s presence and her outlook, the priestess called her ‘an outsider’. Pointing to her Laetitia she commented that: “You are an outsider.” Laetitia revealed her real purpose of visiting the priestess and later agreed to her comments and she responded to the priestess that: “And then... like you said, I was an outsider, because my father was Haitian and he wanted us to speak French. But...” (Tyree 307)

Eugene, one of the major characters in the novel Leslie was searching for his identity. He was from other minority colonial settlers in Louisiana that is mixed race creoles. He felt ashamed of his ethnic group. He was unable to take a firm decision regarding his group. It seemed that he could not conjure his ethnical identity due to imprecise details of his group. In the opinion of Albert Valdman the word creole originates from crioulo or criolo that means “servants raised in their master’s house” (Valdman). The pathetic condition of creoles in the society made him feeling ashamed. Their level is even worse than African-Americans. They are neither considered black nor whites. Eventually he developed a strong sense of getting known in the society. He had uncontrollable impulse to marry Leslie with the aim of at least calling himself an “African-American”. He hoped that he could get some identity by marrying the novel’s protagonist.

Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo* is a detective novel in which he explores the post-modern idea of heterogeneity. There was a major conflict in the novel between the Atonist Path and Jes Grew, in other words between the West and the Non-West. The Atonist’s took a path against the other with the support of what Reed calls its backbone that was its military wing. The primary duty of Atonist was to suppress and eliminate Jes Grew. Reed extraordinarily delineates the act of suppression of the Non-West by the West through this comparison. Jes Grew representing the black culture particularly

Voodoo practices. The novel's central plot portrays the search for the Text by two groups. Two groups were led by Papa LaBas and Hincle Von Vampton, a Knight Templar. Papa LaBas was a Hoodoo detective trying to find the text in order to bring out the beneficial effective of Jes Grew, on the other hand, Vampton was pleased to destroy the Text with the intention of preventing epidemic forever.

Among these two major groups the first group share a dedication to an Atonist. The second group consisted of Jes Grew transporters at the Mumbo Jumbo Cathedral in Harlem. An aging Hoodoo detective and cultural diagnostician Papa LaBas was the novel's protagonist. LaBas detected and aimed at his target that was to reconnect Afro-Americans with their cultural heritage by reunifying the Text (Egyptian Book of Thoth) of Jes Grew. LaBas and his assistant Earline were working to feed the Loas (spirits). LaBas strived to unify the African-American ethnic group and took the responsibility of directing the unpredictable force created by the Wallflower Order to the Knights Templar. Reed has settled subplots from the central story.

There was a clash in Leslie's family regarding their mother tongue. The family's head Jean wanted French to be the spoken language at home; on the other hand mother wanted them to speak English. The children really found it difficult in deciding the key factor that finalises their mother tongue.

The novels of Reed are the portrayal of Afro-American aesthetic, the particular social issues and the difficult conditions of Black Americans. His novels not only illustrate the problems of blacks in America but all over the world. His expressions vividly describe his pessimistic views over racists who predominate the blacks. Reed is considered as a postmodernist writer with his writing style and his concept. He has a passion in depicting the survival of people and the role of culture which he connects with postmodernism.

Reed is an experimental Afro-American writer who has tried to write about unrelated characteristics of black written and unwritten expression. He through his work reflects on different types of culture, his vision of future for African - American and all Americans, his deep distrust of the eastern establishment, his disagreement with white and black feminists and his views on racism and multiculturalism. He is funny, sarcastic, often combative, self-possessed and assertive. His novels reveal an appropriate Afro- American aesthetic and particular condition of Black – Americans.

Identity is the interaction between self and society. It can be answered with respect to culture, religious freedom, tradition, economic opportunities and better life styles. There are different kinds of identity, national identity, social identity, cultural or racial identity, class identity, familial identity, sexual identity etc. All these identities are formed beyond control, some may have multiple or split identity.

Culture is a defining feature of identity of any individual or a society. Culture is an utmost factor contributing to how people see themselves and the communities with which they identify. Every community has its own social values, beliefs, morals, ethics and ways of living, which are inherited from one generation to the other. Food eaten, the type of clothing worn, celebrations of religious rites and political activities and mixing them into only nature, tradition, music, dances and different languages spoken are parts of people's cultural heritage or the identity which is passed to them by their ancestors.

A man gives an inheritance to his children and grandchildren. When we say so, it is usually understood that, we think in terms of money, lands, or possessions. Yet, it is appropriate to think that

wise parents leave a good cultural heritage to their children and grandchildren. This legacy, the value of tradition, history, culture, family honor, and social values should definitely help the future generation to have good understanding to identify themselves.

A powerful secret society that followed the Atonist path along with its militant arm made attempts to create fake black intellectual- a Talking Android. It aimed at discrediting the true protagonists of African-American cultural Renaissance. Other subplot introduced the activities of a multicultural urban guerrilla group (the Mu'tafikah) that sought to return artworks kept in museums to their places of origin in the Third World. The acts of Atonist path and Mu'tafikah alternate with historical subplots, such as ancestry, Administration, and death of President Warren G. Harding and the occupation of Haiti by US troops (Juan-Navarro 139). It also revolves around the history of the Text. In Von Vampton's possession since the Middle Ages, the book had passed fortuitously to Black Nationalist Abdul Sufi Hamid. He was the one who translated it but got murdered soon after. There was an epigram found in the hands of Abdul who grasped it before dying. Fortunately LaBas received this message and found the Book. He secretly buried it in the very centre of the Cotton Club. Papa LaBas got acknowledged with some of the central mysteries, the nature and meaning of Jes Grew, the origin and history of book of Thoth and plots of several secret societies. Finally when he opened the box that he had buried in the Cotton Club was shocked to find that the Text, (the book of Thoth) was gone. He discovered a message written by Abdul. He came to know that the book was burned by Abdul just before the death. He mentioned in the message, he had done so as he found the book to be obscene. It was also discovered that Abdul's translation had been lost. After the destruction of the book, the antagonist Atonists hoped that the epidemic has completely been wiped out. LaBas did not believe it. He revealed that the spirit of Jes Grew shall always be present and will make use of new texts to manifest it.

Reed's use of the word 'head' to describe the Voodoo practices and also to illustrate the multicultural states of African-Americans. The novel's major character Papa LaBas once stated that he was using his two heads. Like Bois' theory of double consciousness, Reed creates 2 heads. LaBas stated once, "I use my 2 heads" (Reed 25). This very ideology proposes the connection between the past and the present. Each person, having two heads, indicates their past and present life. It seems Reed strongly believes in past of African-Americans that alone can confer an identity to them. Denying the past will result in the loss of ethnicity. This is the reason why the novelist suggests the idea through the Voodoo detective Papa LaBas. A strong reflection of the past that LaBas wanted everyone belonging to Jes Grew should have the heads that were left to them or at least they must try to produce their own. Producing their own is not possible without support of the past. The new one can be generated based on the past. Marcus Garvey is one of the members of the group who was using "his own head and is master of his own art" (Reed 39). It indicates the power required to locate the head or heads. The message conveyed here is the use of one's own ethnic practices, though there are some influences. The Western influences need not be given much priority. One, who prefers the native practices would be the master, otherwise will become a slave. Jes Grew takes the role of publicizing previous heads with the result that display the value. Consequently LaBas promotes the use of multiple heads in Mumbo Jumbo. It can strengthen the past combined with the self. The usage of head exhibits the way to tap into the past and create a new from it. LaBas prefers that and appreciates all people discover the old heads and create new ones. This is what we call multicultural history of America like the words of Sleeter who believed that history of racial ethnical groups differ from non-English speakers. "The history, which has helped shape relations among racial and ethnic groups in the United States, as well as dialogue about racial and ethnic relations, differs from that of other English-speaking countries" (5 Sleeter)

The novel (*Mumbo Jumbo*) ends with Papa LaBas' understanding of the power of composition. He realized that simply preserving the past can no longer make any impact. In order to get the Art and culture to improve, it should be left to grow and change with the times. To make this possible, the major thing here is, people need to change the roles of composition when they wish to create their own.

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