

ISHMAEL REED'S SATIRE IN *THE TERRIBLE TWOS***Mr. Vaikunda Mani A**

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Ishmael Reed an African American writer of essays, novels, and poems, was best known for writing satirical novels. Ishmael Reed in his *The Terrible Twos* launches a scathing attack on the social, economic, political, religious and academic institutions of the American mainstream life with a Swiftian irony. *The Terrible Twos* assails the economic, political and social exploitation of the blacks by the whites in American Society. In this select novel Reed's fundamental strategy as a satirist is portrayed. The present article portrays Ishmael Reed's satire in *The Terrible Twos*.

Key Words – Satire, social, economic, political, religious, fundamental strategy and social realist.

Ishmael Reed an African American writer of essays, novels, and poems, was best known for writing satirical novels that consequently generated much heated critical debate. Ishmael Scott Reed was born on February 22, 1938, in Chattanooga, Tennessee. He and his mother moved to Buffalo, New York, when he was four years old. Ishmael exhibited his talent for writing at an early age; as a teenager he had his own jazz column in a local African American newspaper, the *Empire State Weekly*. He began writing fiction while attending night school at the University of Buffalo. His short stories caught the attention of his professors, which led to his enrollment in the university's full-time program. Reed developed his artistic voice in the midst of the civil rights movement of the 1960s. In 1962, Reed moved to New York City, where he became active in the black arts movement—a period of artistic and literary development among African Americans in the 1960s and 1970s that nurtured both the growth and widespread acceptance of African American writers. Reed's writing received many awards over the years, and he was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship in 1975 and a MacArthur fellowship in 1998.

Reed in his *The Terrible Twos* launches a scathing attack on the social, economic, political, religious and academic institutions of the American mainstream life with an irony. *The Terrible Twos* assails the economic, political and social exploitation of the blacks by the whites in American Society. In this select novel Reed's fundamental strategy as a satirist is portrayed. His usual complex of penetrating satire, surrealism, allegory and farce for depicting the state of confusion and pain confronting the blacks in contemporary American society are portrayed in this work. *The Terrible Twos* form a grotesque satire on the political and economic situation of America of 1980s. They focus on contemporary America with its

movie star ' President, passion for military war, monopoly capitalism and increasing gulf between the haves and have nots. They expose the differences and inequalities of race, gender and class existing in American Society.

Reed anatomises the evil influences of monopoly capitalism in such forms as economic, social, military, cultural and religious control. Reed does not embrace socialism as an alternative. His solution to the evils of American society is multiculturalism. Reed offers folkloristic material as the key to resisting the homogenizing oppression of the dominant culture. America's arrogant self assumptions about itself are shown to be the selfish attitudes of a terrible two year old child. The legends and folklore challenge their national egocentricism by showing the central image of consumerism in Santa Claus to be a figure who cannot be reduced to a symbol of accumulation. Significantly his black companion voices through him his refusal of a materialistic orientation. The time of the novel is roughly Christmas 1980 to Christmas 1990 and it is clearly an allegory on the beginning of Ronald Regan's first term as President and the consequences in the 1990s. Regan brings a spirit of meanmindedness to the land. Reed's fictional President Dean Clift an ex-model has a close resemblance to President, Ronald Regan, a Hollywood show.

Clift is not only presented as vain, but more importantly as intellectually incapable of holding his office, which is revealed when he reminisces on how he became president in the first place:

“How did I get mixed up in this? There I was in Congress, doing all right. I didn't have any ambition above that. I took the vice-presidency because nobody else wanted it. How did I know that the President would die in the office? Granted, he was ninety-one years old when they elected him, but he was in good shape” (49).

Furthermore, Reed intensifies his satire of the government by having the incompetence of the president be publicly known by the other characters in the novel. There are numerous examples in the novel. A telling case is his wife's reaction to Clift's wish to leave the office and go for a rather prolonged vacation:

“Now, Dean, you know what happened the last time you took that three-month vacation. There was an outcry from the public. They want you to be visible. They'll start gossiping —you know, your reputation.” “What reputation, Mummy?” “Well, dear, the public doesn't think you're very bright.” “I may not be an intellectual giant, Mummy, but I'm as smart as the next fellow. (50)

The quote strengthens the interpretation of Clift as a highly satirised character. First, the fact that Clift does not realise that a three-month-long vacation would prevent him from doing his duties provides further proof of his unsuitability for the position. Second, his not knowing what the public's opinions are on the matter supports such a reading. And, finally, his feeble attempt at justification reveals what an incongruous choice he is for the role of a president.

The Terrible Twos also criticizes popular culture and the economic and political exploitation of ethnic minorities and the poor. The title, a reference to America's bicentennial, reflects what Reed saw as the rise, with the election of Ronald Reagan as president, of a two-year-old's mentality in American society. Reed speaks of the petulance of the people of the United States who are very fortunate, yet who are always perplexed and complaining about things like two-year olds. In *The Terrible Twos* Reed combines satire and parody to attack white Eurocentred ideologues of domination and power control. *The Terrible, Twos* is a surrealistic variation on the social realist novel of economic complaint. Reed attempts to fuse a surreal puppet show and realistic relationships. In an interview Reed says, “I call it (*The, Terrible Twos*) a social realist proletariat novel inspired by the murals of Orozo”(10).

The Terrible Twos describes the mutiny of a group of ethnic individuals against corporations, whose quest for profit worsens the living conditions of all but the wealthiest.

This novel presents a variation on Reed's traditional target (embodied by one or more powerful white Americans who oppress other minorities) by denouncing them for the damage they inflict on the environment. This novel rewrites the myth of Saint Nicholas and his black servant Black Peter by reversing their power dynamics: Black Peter is presented as the saint and Saint Nicholas as the sinner. Thus this novel has also been interpreted as satirical.

The notion that contemporary America - with its movie-star President, passion for military hardware, increasing polarization of haves and have-nots - is as politically mature as a two-year-old child is socially adept, would seem a thin enough idea on which to peg a novel. But Ishmael Reed's *The Terrible Twos*, takes its title from this notion, and some paragraphs are devoted to developing it, this one theme does not begin to exhaust what the novel is about.

The Terrible Twos has two parts. The brief opening section, called "A Past Christmas," describes the global and national disarray prevailing around the time of Christmas, 1980, and it introduces some of the characters who will reappear a decade later in the fullness of their influence and decline. Part Two, "A Future Christmas," projects ahead to the awful days of December 1990, when the gap between the people called "vital" (those in power) and the people called "surplus" (everyone else) is virtually unbridgeable. The President of the United States is a former male model (clearly a step down the ladder). "Santa Claus," is a 17th-century English corruption of the Dutch "Sint Nikolaas," and St. Nicholas, as the novel points out, is a flying, gift-giving figure who contributed to the world the pawnbroker's symbol of three gold balls. He traveled, in the company of a short, mysterious black man who really pulled his strings. This black turns up in various guises in both parts of "*The Terrible Twos*": first as a ventriloquist wearing a red wig at Macy's 1980 Thanksgiving Day parade; later as Black Peter, head of a rival faction within the Nicolaites, an organization dedicated to restoring Santa, as well as a measure of dignity, to the masses. Saints and ordinary folk, white and black, move easily between time zones in Mr. Reed's fiction; this seems to exert no great strain on credibility.

The world that Reed develops in the narrative is quilted with endless allusions, mythologies, improvisation and concentric circles of time and culture. Though Reed has rejected realism and surrealism as the ways of depleting fictional reality, in *The Terrible Twos*, he invariably resorts to surrealistic techniques. He uses the technique of interior monologue to lay bare the inner motives, inner conflicts and subconscious motives of the character. As a part of his narrative technique, Reed jerks the action to stop from time to time to summarize the developments as Reed is dealing with the events taking place in America over a decade.

The Terrible Twos features a number of instances which document this incongruous pairing. In the novel, Clift, as the president of the United States of America, officially meets "the chairman of the American Nazi Party . . . in the White House" (49-50), which a non-fictional president of the U.S could hardly afford. Further, it is revealed that "Congress has set aside an American holiday to celebrate the Führer's birthdate" (58) who is also given "posthumous American citizenship" (66). Such actions are incredibly incongruous because of the history of the United States of America in the last century.

The novel is set in an alternative version of the United States of America where millions of its inhabitants are on the brink of poverty on account of buying non-essential items produced by corporations. Their unceasing production plunders the Earth (3) while ensuring that ordinary citizens remain financially insecure. Yet, such a state of affairs is both tolerated and implicitly sanctioned by the government (4). Reed's irony thus targets both the members of corporations and the government, with special emphasis placed on the character of the President, Dean Clift, whom it satirises by means of an ironic portrayal.

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