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## Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*: A Postcolonial Reading

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### Résumé

Cette étude propose d'interpréter *Mumbo Jumbo* comme le discours postcolonial de Reed contre les entités puissantes qui cherchent à opprimer, contrôler et maintenir le statu quo dans le monde et particulièrement en Amérique. Fondé sur des concepts postcoloniaux clés tels que le discours colonial, l'idéologie colonialiste, l'altérité, la résistance culturelle et la décolonisation, cet article révèle comment Reed assimile le monde noir américain à une sphère qui croule encore sous le joug de l'oppression et de l'impérialisme occidental et comment ce dernier articule sa lutte de libération. Ainsi, d'une part, l'étude soutient que le monde noir américain est toujours considéré comme une colonie à l'intérieur des États-Unis et qu'il doit faire face à la psychologie ou à l'idéologie colonialiste des Atonistes couplée à un incessant discours colonial, le tout destiné à établir l'hégémonie culturelle des blancs tout en dégradant les noirs. D'autre part, elle se concentre sur la résistance culturelle et les efforts de décolonisation orchestrés par les noirs américains à travers l'émergence de structures culturelles puissantes telles que Jes Grew, le Vaudou et le Mu'tafikah. Mais surtout, la réflexion montre que *Mumbo Jumbo* est le lieu où de multiples voix et histoires sont autorisées.

**Mots-clés:** Discours colonial, Psychologie colonialiste, Résistance Culturelle, Jes Grew, Décolonisation, Atonisme.

### Abstract

This work proposes to interpret *Mumbo Jumbo* as Ishmael Reed's postcolonial discourse against powerful entities which seek to oppress, control and maintain the status quo in the world and particularly in America. Grounded in key postcolonial concepts such as colonial discourse, colonialist ideology, otherness, cultural resistance and decolonization, this article reveals how Reed equates the Black American world with a sphere that is still crumbling under the yoke of oppression and Western imperialism and how the latter articulates its liberation struggle. So, on the one hand, the study argues that the black American world is still viewed as a colony inside the United States, and that it has to face the Atonists' colonialist psychology or ideology coupled with an unabated colonial discourse, all of which is

intended to establish whites' cultural hegemony while demeaning black people. On the other hand, it focuses on the cultural resistance and decolonization efforts orchestrated by black Americans through the emergence of powerful cultural structures such as Jes Grew, the Voodoo and the Mu'tafikah. But above all the work shows that *Mumbo Jumbo* is the locus where multiple voices and stories are authorized.

**Keywords:** Colonial discourse, Colonialist psychology, Cultural Resistance, Jes Grew, Decolonization, Atonism

### **Introduction**

*Mumbo Jumbo* is Ishmael Reed's award-winning novel that was published in 1972. With its experimental, non-linear structure, its combination of the textual and the visual, through drawings, photographs and images, and its skillful blending of elements of detective fiction, historical narrative and philosophical inquiry, the novel appears as one of the sharpest literary eccentricities. Because of this aesthetic autonomy and its overt use of satire and parody, Reed's novel has been cataloged as an averred postmodern masterpiece. Yet, the narrative's reflection of the African American cultural awakening of the 1970s, coupled with its challenges to the Western dominant narratives and its celebration of African and Afro-diasporic traditions, has lent Reed's text some anti-colonialist undertones, therefore giving sense to the stance that holds that Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* is actually a postcolonial critique against Western cultural imperialism. So, how can *Mumbo Jumbo* be construed as a postcolonial undertaking? At first glance, Reed's choice of setting and major themes somehow already allows the reader to presume the pertinence of a postcolonial reading.

The story is set in 1920s America during the Harlem Renaissance. A mysterious cultural plague called "Jes Grew" is spreading through America. As a contagious, dance-like spiritual force, Jes Grew represents African diasporic culture and symbolizes black emancipation, definitely threatening the established order by upsetting western norms and hegemonic postures.

From this perspective, Reed's narrative is already in line with Lois Tyson's prospect of postcolonial criticism which stipulates that critical postcolonial analysis can be operated in two contexts: as a subject matter and as a theoretical framework. As a subject matter, postcolonial criticism analyzes literatures produced by cultures that developed in reaction to colonial domination (L. Tyson, p. 418). As a theoretical framework though, it "seeks to understand the operations – politically, socially, culturally, and psychologically – of colonialist and anti-colonialist ideologies." (L. Tyson, p. 418) In either option, *Mumbo Jumbo* is liable to a postcolonial critical interpretation. For, as Harold Cruse posits, using the concept of 'colonial analogy' to describe the social reality of African Americans, "the economic and political conditions endured by blacks under slavery and Jim Crow segregation in the United States were comparable to those of colonized people, with the main difference being their residence within the mother country." (H. Cruse, p. 5) Considering that "his [The Negro] national boundaries are the color of his skin," (H. Cruse, p. 5) Cruse defines the social position of the Black American as a "domestic colony".

The intersection of the perspectives of Tyson and Cruse lays ground for a postcolonial exploration of *Mumbo Jumbo* where the black community in the 1970s Harlem, New York, is trying to resist to the pervasive Atonist colonialist ideology, the cultural asphyxiation orchestrated by the Wallflower Order and the attempt to maintain the status quo. As a critique of Western hegemony, *Mumbo Jumbo* attempts to valorize an African American identity while rejecting Eurocentric values; challenges the centrality of Western culture by uplifting African and African American cultural expressions; and proposes alternative histories to step away from fixed versions.

Drawing upon the post-colonialist perspectives of theorists like Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, Asante Molefi and Chinua Achebe, the analysis purports to highlight how through the use of colonial discourse and stereotypes, the West tries to construe Africa and African Americans as demonic others; and how Reed articulates the subversion of the western cultural imperialism and hegemony through cultural movements and phenomena.

Accordingly, the study is articulated around four segments. The first discusses the West's cultural hegemony and imperialism. The second highlights Blacks' cultural resistance and their reclamation of their heritage and identity. The third emphasizes how Eurocentric Histories are subverted. And the last analyzes the Mu'tafikah's activities as a decolonization process.

## **1 – WESTERN HEGEMONY AND CULTURAL IMPERIALISM**

In Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*, Western hegemony and the West's cultural domination scheme are perceptible through the power structures that are handled by the West to suppress non-western cultures, but also through the discourses and condescending attitudes that pivotal individuals in such institutions adopt. The Atonist Path and organizations such as the Wallflower Order symbolize the cultural dynamics of control and repression, and use them to show how the West constantly conspires to suppress Africans and African Americans' cultures while imposing its cultural hegemony. To display the extent of such imperialistic maneuvers and highlight their diachronic dimensions, Reed exhumes centuries-old plots dating back to Ancient Egypt. But he also shows that the domination plots are put in motion by powerful individuals at the head of imperialistic institutions: politicians (for political conspiracies), tycoons, oil magnets, businessmen (for economic conspiracies), and media men (for ideological conspiracies). All these people often belong to secret societies which work together to maintain the cultural status quo. While individuals such as Hinckle Von Vampton, who is the executive director of *The New York Sun*, are active to weaken African Americans culturally and ideologically, Biff Musclewhite, director of the Art Detention Center, has to make sure that non-western cultural artifacts are locked up in museums, and therefore preventing a cultural awakening of the victims.

Beside the power structures, Reed also shows Western hegemony through the discourse and psychology of salient individuals. Although the whole story in *Mumbo Jumbo* is an allegory of the colonialist ideology, because of the persistent and pervasive supremacist postures held by the members of the

Atonist Path, the most patent case of colonialist psychology and colonial discourse in the novel is provided by Biff Muscwhite, the bigoted, racist, condescending, narcissistic and classist employee of the Wallflower Order. Muscwhite is one of the key symbols of Atonism, the Western and Eurocentric thought. He works as the curator of the Center of Art Detention, the Metropolitan Museum of Art where all the non-white art looted during colonization is held in captivity. That position has made him the ideal target for the Mu'tafikah who sees him as the most perfect epitome of imperialism and colonialism to be neutralized. As a result, he is kidnapped and his captivity is entrusted to Thor Wintergreen, the only white European of the group. Unfortunately for the Mu'tafikah, Thor Wintergreen is from the aristocratic white privileged class, with a supremacist mentality. So despite his apparent empathy to the cause of the gang, Muscwhite's sermons quickly destabilize him as will show his final radical shift.

Muscwhite uses a chauvinistic, aristocratic and supremacist posture as he depicts the Mu'tafikah. By disparaging it as a non-western gang with non-western ideals, he intends to prove Thor that it is not his natural environment. Though Thor initially describes Muscwhite's discourse as "hypocritical language" (*Mumbo Jumbo*, 111), he finally falls into the net. Because Thor is already naturally imbued with colonialist and supremacist ideologies, his resistance to his captive's argument cannot last long. Muscwhite's objective is to awaken in Thor the feeling of belonging to a ruling class which should under no circumstances descend into the fray. So, he reminds him of his class and living standards: "The many times I saw you when your father brought you in the yacht club; a little child dressed in a fashion after Gainsborough's Blue Boy." (*Mumbo Jumbo*, 111) The references chosen here are not fortuitous. They evoke the power and refined character that the Wintergreens have. Once Muscwhite has convinced Thor of his true belonging, he begins to point at his fellows in the Mu'tafikah as demonic others, as primitive and uncivilized individuals: "You are all we have against them, Against the Legendary Army of Marching Niggers against the Yellow Peril against the Red Man." (*Mumbo Jumbo*, 112) In Muscwhite's discourse, there is this insipid way of 'othering' non-western people. He constantly contrasts the two communities through binary oppositions: "our glorious Western civilization,

You, a young Prince of Our Ways” against “a band of ...of...of *Mu'tafikah*.” (*Mumbo Jumbo*, 113) His discourse mainly emphasizes the wide gap he believes exists between the Western civilization and that of others:

I've seen them in, son, in Africa, China, they are not like us, son, the Herrenvolk. Europe. This place they are lagging behind, sob, and you know in your heart that this is true. Son, these niggers writing. Profaning our sacred words. Taking them from us and beating them on the anvil of Boogie Woogie, putting their black hands on them so that they shine like burnished amulets. Taking our words, son, these filthy niggers and using them like they were their god-given pussy. (*Mumbo Jumbo*, 114)

Musclewhite's discourse in the novel is a typical example of colonial discourse because it focuses on marginalization. It tends to unequivocally stress what makes both Blacks and their culture dissimilar from or opposite to the Westerners'. The abundant use of binary oppositions as “we / them”, “us / they”, “glorious / uncivilized” and the numberless stereotypical images as well as demonic portrayals are signs of his supremacist and colonialist psychology. Indeed, Musclewhite's discourse confirms Bhabha's idea that colonial discourse is a schema dependent upon the notion difference, where domination and power of the most powerful are at stake. Regarding Musclewhite's attitude, we fully agree with Bhabha's postulate that the purpose of colonial discourse is to construe the colonized as a people of debased kinds on the basis of racial origin, so as to rationalize control and to institute schemes of domination and repression. Edward Said also presented colonial discourse as a discourse of power and domination as he argues in his essay “The Other Question: Stereotypes, discrimination and the discourse of Colonialism.” that the purpose of colonial discourse is to construe the colonized (or the subaltern) as immoral people taking race as the main argument. Colonial discourse, as Said concludes, restricts the subaltern to such patterns that maintain them as “others”.

Beyond these binaries, Musclewhite's discourse is also characterized by stereotypes and racial hatred. He often regards the members of the *Mu'tafikah* as “loafers, ne'er-do-wells, nihilists.” (*Mumbo Jumbo*, 113) As Homi Bhabha explains, stereotyping and othering, as pivotal parts of the colonial discourse,

are two close attitudes by which individuals, or groups are attributed identities, societal positions and characteristics that will maintain them at the margin of the mainstream position. Drawing upon Michel Foucault and Edward Said's works, he tries to show how stereotypes and discrimination are pivotal in the discourse of colonialism. Foucault believes that discourse is a body of knowledge that people in power, who have the institutional prestige, use to convey their world vision. And we believe this discourse because the statements are being made within the larger framework of scientific knowledge that governs society. It is comparable to Althusser's notion of ideology where people in power often use power structures to accommodate powerless people to their rule subtly. Similarly, Edward Said, analyzed discourse as an instrument in the hands of powerful entities who have the power to record and define those over whom they have the power.

Musclewhite is also penetrated by what is called the colonialist psychology/ ideology, a mentality by which a member of the ruling class would continue to look down on members of the ruled class. He would often evoke his supremacist and condescending outlooks and make use of his white privilege. As Musclewhite refers to Berbelang, the leader of the Mu'tafikah group, he describes him as "a nigger gone berserk. The nigger the planters kept from other niggers so they wouldn't catch what he had. The insolent freeman who will sit in the front of the and look about as if to say 'Who don't like it?'" (*Mumbo Jumbo*, 113) Musclewhite's words somewhat attest to his attachment to Negroes' servitude, to racism and to segregation.

It is startling that until the 1920s, long after the Emancipation proclamation, and long after a good number of Blacks have grown intellectual, Musclewhite still continues to demean black folk regarding them as unworthy of the West's civilization. Reed uses the character of Musclewhite to embody the persistence of colonialist psychology in the United States.

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## 2 – CULTURAL RESISTANCE OR THE RECLAMATION OF AFRICAN AND AFRO-DIASPORIC IDENTITY

The phenomenon called Jes Grew in *Mumbo Jumbo*, given the worst names by the Atonists – sometimes "psychic epidemic" (*Mumbo Jumbo*, 5), sometimes "psychic plague" (*Mumbo Jumbo*, 17), and other times "the boll weevil eating away at the fabric of our forms our technique our aesthetic integrity" (*Mumbo Jumbo*, 17) – is however Reed's metaphor for Blacks' cultural resistance.

Jes Grew symbolizes a dynamic and emancipating cultural power that challenges oppressive structures, mainly those of Western civilization. It represents the expansion of African American culture, specifically spirituality, music, dance, and creativity, which are depicted as contagious and transformative. Jes Grew symbolizes rebellion against the restrictions and conventions of a Eurocentric worldview, eulogizing the vitality, improvisation, and self-determination related to African and African-American societies and traditions. Actually, Jes Grew reflects the rebirth of African diasporic cultural forms, defying cultural imperialism. It is the allegorical expression of the ways African-American culture has influenced and remodeled mainstream culture. Rooted in Spiritual traditions like Voodoo, Jes Grew eschews Western materialism and dogma and epitomizes individual freedom and the untamable expression of joy, creativity, and sensuality at odds with Western rationalism and control. Jes Grew's role recalls Asante Molefi's appeals to African Americans as developed in *The Afrocentric Idea*. Arguing for a shift of perspective in which Blacks become subjects rather than objects of their own history and cultural expression, his core principle is to decenter Eurocentrism and challenge Western epistemology. Asante insists that Afrocentric thought restores African (or African American) agency that has been denied by Eurocentric historiography.

Most observers would also see that the spirit of Jes Grew corresponds to the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement to a certain extent. As a movement of the 1920s and 1930s, which is also the fictional time of *Mumbo Jumbo*, the Harlem Renaissance is the cultural, social and artistic explosion

that originated in Harlem, New York. It is a movement of unprecedented magnitude that embodies the culmination of the creation of the Black American and which emphasizes the celebration of the culture, arts and intellectual achievements of African Americans.

Jes Grew coincides with another artistic movement that sweeps the nation: the “New Negro”. No wonder if the novel mentions and even acknowledges sources from authors like Alain Locke, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Jean Toomer, Wallace Henry Thurman, Dorothy West. Ignoring the barriers between fiction and reality, Reed makes many of these intellectuals interact in his plot, thus making *Mumbo Jumbo* a work of overwhelming realism. Just as the Harlem Renaissance Movement sought to challenge racial stereotypes and reclaim an African American identity through art, literature and music, Jes Grew in *Mumbo Jumbo* also claims an African American identity. Reed celebrates African roots through Jes Grew, voodoo practices and the retrieval of artifacts of African origin.

Jes Grew can also be likened to the Black Arts Movements of the 1960s and 1970s which sought to create a new cultural aesthetic that would reflect the social, political and economic concerns of African Americans. Upon analysis, we can notice that *Mumbo Jumbo* embodies the spirit of the Black Arts Movement as much as that of the Harlem Renaissance, in as much as the work challenges Western cultural dominance while promoting an autonomous African American culture and identity. Jes Grew is presented in *Mumbo Jumbo* as a “virus” which jeopardizes the colonialist establishment which persists. It therefore represents a resurgence of African diasporic culture. Reed draws on Harlem Renaissance topics of pride and resistance as a foundation for his exploration of African American cultural identity. It is right to perceive Jes Grew as a metaphor for cultural resistance, for ideological resistance against the rule that the Atonists want to impose on black Americans. Because not only does the movement demonstrate the vitality, vibrancy and resilience of African American culture, but it positions itself as an irreversible emancipation force of a community that has long been stultified. It is the symbolism of an identity which seeks to assume itself and assert its indestructibility in the face of white hegemony. It represents

~~~~ Soro Dolourou ~~~~

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resistance against programmed cultural erasure, but is beyond everything, the reclamation of its African roots.

The spread of Jes Grew upsets hierarchical and colonialist power structures, representing postcolonial resistance. It threatens the Atonists, who embody the forces of domination, orthodoxy, and overpowering.

By framing Jes Grew as an “epidemic” that spreads ecstasy and creativity, Reed denounces the historical stigmatization of Black culture while lauding its transformative power. It is a living, vibrant and mysterious force that resists commodification and absorption as the emblematic character PaPa LaBas defines it:

Jes Grew has no end and no beginning. It even precedes that little ball that exploded 1000000000s of years ago and led to what we are now. Jes Grew may even have caused the ball to explode. We will miss it for a while but it will come back, and when it returns we will see that it never left. You see, life will never end; there is really no end to life, if anything goes it will be death. Jes Grew is life. (*Mumbo Jumbo*, 204)

The Atonists revere the uncontrollable and intoxicating fervor that spreads day by day and which takes possession of the popular black masses. Its promoters, the musicians, called in *Mumbo Jumbo*, “Jes Grew Carriers” (*Mumbo Jumbo*, 16) who are said to have come, as Reed explains, “to America because of cotton” (*Mumbo Jumbo*, 16) in reference to slavery, are shaking off the yoke of subservience, while asserting their cultural identity. Therefore, Jes Grew appears as a great threat to the West’s cultural hegemony and imperialism, as has once admitted an Atonist during one of their meetings: “This augurs badly, for if Jes Grew is immune to the old remedies, the saving Virus in the blood of Europe, mankind is lost.” (*Mumbo Jumbo*, 18) The extent of that threat is measurable through the means that are deployed to neutralize it. All sectors and organs of the Atonist world are activated to silence the phenomena (Jes Grew and Voodoo). As a result, political figures are often approved depending on their degree of hatred to the Black cause. For example, because Warren Harding acknowledged as an anti-Jes Grew candidate, the Wallflower Order made him win the presidency especially as he promised put an end to the infection once elected: “Let’s be

done with Wiggle and Wobble’, indicating that he will not tolerate this spreading infection. All sympathizers will be dealt with; all carriers isolated and disinfected, Immuno-Therapy will begin once he takes office.” (*Mumbo Jumbo*, 17) Reed also reveals that the 1929 crisis was intentionally triggered by some economical shenanigans in order to put a damper on African American’s cultural upsurge. Walter Mellon who conducts the Order of the Wallflower in America explains the tricks:

Suppose we shut down a few temples...I mean banks, take money out of circulation, how would people be able to support the appendages of Jes Grew, the cabarets the jook joints and the speaks. Suppose we put a tax on the dance floors and get out circulation J. G. C.s like musicians, dancers, its doers, its irrepressible fancy. Suppose we take musicians out of circulation, arrest them on trumped-up drug charges and give them unusually long and severe prison sentences. Suppose w subsidize the 100s of symphony orchestras across the country, have government-sponsored Waltz-boosting campaigns, disperse the art from the Art Detention Center so that if the *Mu’tafikah* strike again all of the pillage won’t be in 1 place. (*Mumbo Jumbo*, 154-55)

The control of Jes Grew also often goes through military action. The war the American nation waged against Haiti happened not so much for economic and geostrategic incentives, but actually because the Atonists sought to allay “the Jes Grew symptoms by attacking its miasmatic source.” (*Mumbo Jumbo*, 64)

By showing the Wallflower Order’s efforts being made against Jes Grew, Reed insinuates that this phenomenon is a serious threat to Western order and power. Viewed from a broader perspective, this fight represents a broader conflict between Western imperialism and the practices, ideals and aspirations of African Americans seeking to survive.

To put it simply, Reed presents on the one hand the Atonists who are the ruling class, who have imposed their order, their vision on the world, and who have been fighting to preserve their interests and their cultural and ideological hegemony for centuries. On the other, an African American resistance movement whose members are in search of identity and who are in a

momentum to make their voice heard (culturally, socially and racially). It is the voice of the subaltern that emerges, to borrow Spivak's term.

### 3 – SUBVERSION OF EUROCENTRIC HISTORIES

In keeping with the postcolonial strategy of reclaiming and retelling the past from a nonwestern perspective, Reed creates alternative histories that contradict the versions that have previously circulated. In an Afrocentric stance, Reed refutes history as it has been told by the West by denying the certainties resulting from Eurocentric worldviews. Thus, he constructs a narrative which points to Africa as the origin of civilization, knowledge and religion.

Atonism in *Mumbo Jumbo* is an allegory of Western thinking, with Christianity, rationality, Eurocentrism and world control as its pillars. By evoking the downsides of the history of Christianity made up of battles and crusades, Reed depicts an unpleasant image of Atonism. In a way, Reed's narrative links the emergence of such secret societies (the Wallflower Order, the Knights Templar, the Teutonic, the Masons, the Illuminati) to the history Popes and Kings. As opposed to Eurocentric pictures, Reed depicts Atonism as "racist, fascist and utterly bent on domination of others, especially African Americans." (Jonathan P. Lewis, p.82) Jonathan Lewis believes that "Reed subverts the white belief in a European culture superior to all others." (Jonathan P. Lewis, p.82) Indirectly, Reed connects the evils of such organizations to Christianity and rather depicts Voodoo and Jes Grew as alternatives.

By establishing an Egyptian origin for Atonism, Reed also clearly contradicts the Western version that states that Greece is the cradle of Western civilization. Indeed, consistent with Cheikh Anta Diop's Afrocentric theories Diop in his book *Negro Nations and Culture*, and George G. M. James theses developed in his work entitled *Stolen Legacy*, Reed denies these century-old certainties that point to Europe as the origin of knowledge, civilization and religion. He constructs a new history that designates Egypt as the starting point of civilization. Reed places the starting point of Atonism in the reign of

the Egyptian God, Osiris. Its birth dates back to the fratricidal antagonism between Osiris and his younger brother Set. Jealous of the political, economic and socio-cultural choices of his older brother who reigned over Egypt (choices emphasizing agriculture, music and dance), Set plotted against him and had him mutilated. Turning his back on ancient practices, he created a new religion based on the worship of the sun (Aton), which would become Atonism and would be spread throughout the world by its followers. Being fundamentally opposed to the pagan and necromantic practices of the followers of Osiris, the Atonists developed a path that deviates, today, from Western thought (Christianity and Cartesian visions of the world).

Reed's novel also proposes a historical revision of the Atonist postulates that regard Europe as the cradle of science and knowledge. Crediting the theses of Afrocentric George James who stipulates that Greek philosophy would have been "stolen" from ancient Egypt, whose traditions would have developed on African cultural bases, he explains that all worthwhile scientific knowledge, especially agronomy, originated with Ancient Egypt.

It was during the reign of Osiris that agricultural science / agronomy got developed. While he was a prince, Osiris traveled and studied at the University of Nysa, in Arabia Felix (today Yemen) and would have collected notes of knowledge on agriculture. And Reed describes that there were at that time agronomists "who influenced the growth of crops and coaxed the cocks into procreation" (*Mumbo Jumbo*, 161) even if at the time they were called "sorcerers" (*Mumbo Jumbo*, 161) The main economic pillar of the reign of Osiris was agriculture, which ensured agricultural abundance and occasioned an orgy of celebrations but in peace. But if Osiris, according to Reed, is the one who revealed agronomy to the world through his travels, the origin of all this knowledge remains Yemen, especially, from black scholars: "the sagacious bearded Black men in Arabia Felix at the University of Nysa." (*Mumbo Jumbo*, 165).

Taking up Cheick Anta Diop's Afrocentric theses that Egypt was black, Reed's story weaves a tapestry of black figures whose struggles made up Egypt. In his desire to subvert the historical narratives of the West, Reed describes the Egyptian gods and characters as all being black. Whether it is

Osiris, Set, Isis, Moses or Jethro, Reed releases a bundle of clues to assert that they had a black complexion.

The story of Moses is particularly rewritten in total opposition to that conveyed in the Old Testament. The version that Reed presents of Moses' moral personality in *Mumbo Jumbo* is quite unpleasant. He is a dishonest man that often has recourse to trickery to achieve his goals. For instance, he had to deceive Jethro, the wise old musician, to obtain his musical knowledge. After paying some thugs to stun Jethro's herd and assault his daughters, he came innocently as a rescuer of both the old man's cattle and family. His strategy did work since Jethro ended up adopting him as a son. From this proximity, Moses could learn, from the old man, the techniques of his mysterious music. Once he believed he had mastered the old man's art well, he decided to leave surreptitiously. But the wise old man warns him that the notes he knew were only a little part of his art. For, unless he knew the words behind all the notes, they would be of no use to him. Since the words were a family secret and could only be passed on to a family member or a son-in-law, the unmasked Moses decides to delay his departure until he could marry Jethro's daughter. Working to remove any suspicion about himself, he served the old man with submission and finally marries the daughter and was therefore taught the words. Fulfilled, Moses now shows his indecent and dishonest side. He abandons his wife and goes to Egypt to reign there.

Reed also shows that his reign was an era of chaos and turmoil for Egypt caused by his lack of wisdom and honesty. Under him, the country fell into anarchy and he had to resort, as an Atonist, to repression to continue to impose himself. This image contrasts sharply with that which Christianity (Atonism) has given to the world.

Reed critiques the notion of history as a fixed, objective account, presenting it instead as a contested space where multiple voices and stories coexist. This reflects Chinua Achebe's postcolonial understanding of history. So like Chinua Achebe, who criticized Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*' colonialist psychology in his essay "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*", Reed also denounces the Atonists' colonialist project that regards Blacks as primitive with primitive religious and cultural practices. In

the essay, indeed, Achebe critiques how western literature constructs Africa as the “Other”, the foil to European self-definition. Achebe’s will of presenting a rejoicing Africa is what Reed has successfully resurrected in *Mumbo Jumbo* with a Jes Grew that stands proudly to challenge Western representations.

#### **4 – THE MU’TAFIKAH OR THE DECOLONIZATION PROJECT**

The decolonization project in *Mumbo Jumbo* is actually reflected in the activities of the Mu'tafikah. As an anti-colonialist multiracial organization, its main mission consists in locating and stealing all significant non-Western artifacts from Western museums and returning them to their original cultures. When Berbelang, the leader of the group, rails “what good is someone’s amulet or pendant if it’s in a Western Museum” (*Mumbo Jumbo*, 88), he actually denounces the Western world’s malevolent mindset that seeks to expunge non-Western cultures. Berbelang’s rant insinuates that the placement of these cultural objects in Western museums dispossesses their initial owners of some of their powers. Thus, returning the “plundered art to Africa, South America and China, the ritual accessories which had been stolen,” could help these communities see “the gods return and the spirits aroused.” (*Mumbo Jumbo*, 88)

Awareness of this injustice took place during history classes where the members of the Mu'tafikah group witnessed trivialization and desecration non-Western sacred objects were subjected: “We began to see that the Art instructor was speaking as if he didn’t know we were in the room. We felt as if we were in church, stupid dull sculpture being blown up to the religious objects.” (*Mumbo Jumbo*, 89) Shocked by this Western outlook incarnated by their Art instructor, they vowed to change things: “We decided that we would be heir desecrators, that we would send their loot back to where it was stolen and await the rise of Shango, Shiva, and Quetzalcoatl...” (*Mumbo Jumbo*, 89)

Right from the outset, the Mu'tafikah considers the detention of non-western artifacts in Western museums as a colonialist and imperialistic project that needs to be countered. Rightly so, because outside of a neo-imperialist

project, it is difficult to justify this Westerners' desire to preserve cultural works which do not come from their cultures in their museums. If these objects do not bring anything cultural to the West, their absence in the original societies, on the other hand, is a serious handicap. Very often, tam tams, masks, statuettes, represent cultural knots in their tribes of origin. Needless to emphasize, their presence help regulate societal life. A good number of initiations, prohibitions and celebrations take place around some of these objects. Others artifacts used to have a military use, serving either to organize resistance or to give power to specific individuals. The kings or chiefs relied on certain others to establish order and discipline, and to administer justice.

To actuate the subaltern peoples' decolonization process, Reed empowers the Mu'tafikah in the novel to lead a crucial cultural battle, that of retrieving African art and artifacts stolen by Western museums, which had appropriated these cultural objects during colonial conquest. As a matter of fact, the Mu'tafikah literally embodies the reclamation of identity by repossessing what was taken under colonialism, both physically and symbolically. Their (the members of the Mu'tafikah) mission to retrieve African cultural symbols reflects the broader postcolonial struggle to restore heritage and dignity to colonized peoples, challenging the European cultural hegemony.

Decolonization in *Mumbo Jumbo* is also that of the mind. The novel attempts to "decolonize" thought by mixing African cultural elements with those of the West, stressing its denunciation of the colonial mindset. The decolonization project stems from the way Reed presents the antagonisms between the structures of Atomism and those that fight for the survival of the African cultural heritage. PaPa LaBas, who leads the religious revolt because of his desire to proclaim the preeminence of Voodoo over Christianity, wants his right to exist to be recognized. He recalls this famous familiar epigram that sums up anti-colonialist thought: "Orthodoxy is my Doxy. Heterodoxy is the other fellow's Doxy." (*Mumbo Jumbo*, 48) This epigram is a call for concession addressed to Westerners. Indeed, Papa LaBas is a central figure of resistance, symbolizing the role of the African spiritual leader. His role as a practitioner of Voodoo denotes a connection to African spiritual traditions and knowledge systems that colonial powers sought to delegitimize. Papa

LaBas actively works to reclaim this lost history and confront the forces of cultural imperialism. Definitely, as a figure of African acumen, PaPa LaBas symbolizes the retrieval of pre-colonial African identity and traditions, repudiating the imposed colonial structures of knowledge and religion.

The novel suggests that reclaiming African spiritual practices is essential to decolonizing the mind. By implementing African cosmologies and rejecting Western religious frameworks, the characters reconnect with African roots while resisting the colonial imposition of Christianity, anything that permits them to achieve a sense of liberation and sovereignty.

Closely observed, decolonization or resistance to colonialism is carried out, on the one hand, through the Jes Grew expansion which serves as a form of opposition to colonialist powers, and on the other hand, through the activities of the Mu'tafikah and the emblematic characters who embody cultural resistance. PaPa LaBas and the Mu'afikah Gang are indeed the figures who challenge the dominant cultural discourse and fight for the reclamation of African traditions.

### **Conclusion**

Undeniably, *Mumbo Jumbo* is Ishmael Reed's contribution to the broader postcolonial debate. Although the novel is set in America and has placed African Americans at the heart of the narrative, the issue at large is the condition of subaltern peoples from various corners of the world, whose common harasser is Atonism. The Atonists embody the colonial forces of control and suppression. With their belief that Western culture is "The most notable achievement of mankind" (*Mumbo Jumbo*, 57), prompt all Western domination structures to assert Western cultural hegemony. And that attempt to maintain power and control over subaltern peoples is observable through the Wallflower members' resort to colonial discourse, colonialist psychology and stereotypes. As a counter-attack, Reed suggests an anti-imperialist plan as he instigates the fight for liberation which involves Jes Grew, the Mu'tafikah and to some extent, PaPa LaBas. While Jes Grew is the direct metaphor of the cultural resistance of oppressed people because it represents

African American culture's vitality, dynamism, and refusal to be suppressed by the dominant colonial powers, the Mu'tafikah is the incarnation of the decolonization project whose mission consists in reconquering the cultural heritage stolen by the colonizers during colonization. And Papa LaBas, who is in connection with both, stands in direct sharp opposition with Western beliefs, striving to keep and reinvigorate African culture and religion.

All in all, the novel's revising of history from an Afrocentric standpoint is a direct challenge to colonial historiography. By privileging African and diasporic narratives, Reed proclaims the prominence of reclaiming historical agency from colonial powers that have traditionally controlled and deformed historical accounts. Definitely, Reed's rewriting of history includes marginalized voices and challenges the dominant historical discourse.

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