

Oppression, Struggle, and Empowerment: Tracing Change in the Select Novels of Ernest J. Gaines

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Abstract—Change is an inevitable aspect of life, often shaped by struggle and resilience. In the context of Black people’s lives, change does not occur spontaneously but is achieved through constant struggle and suffering. This paper explores the recurring theme of transformation in Ernest J. Gaines’ select novels *Catherine Carimer* (1964), *Of Love and Dust* (1967), *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971), and *A Gathering of Old Men* (1983). Gaines’ characters, both protagonists and supporting characters, reflect the racial, social, and gender oppressions experienced by Black people as they navigate their complex lifestyles and their struggle for personal and communal identity. This paper focuses on how individual and collective transformations take place in the characters’ lives as they challenge white authority by finding strength within their communities. Additionally, it highlights the pivotal role women play in stimulating change and their courage in overcoming the obstacles they face in their day-to-day lives. Through these stories, this paper reflects how Gaines’ characters exemplify the struggle for personal freedom, dignity, justice amidst oppressive societal conditions and the acquired empowerment both individually and collectively.

Index Terms—discrimination, empowerment, collective action, transformation

I. INTRODUCTION

Discrimination, oppression, and struggle are recurring words that are related to the lives of Black people whose experiences are well-known around the world as they lived through slavery and suffering. The harsh realities of racial discrimination, the slave trade, and oppression have been widely discussed in numerous works by African Americans and other writers. The empowerment of Black people is the outcome of prolonged battles, rather than a natural progression. Ernest J. Gaines, a renowned Black American writer, is one of those who focus on racial and gender discrimination and social injustices faced by Black Americans in his works. This paper examines four select novels by Gaines that portray the personal and collective transformation of Black people, their journey from one plantation to another as slaves, and the challenges they face along the way. Through these novels, the author reflects the complex and oppressive social structures that challenge Black protagonists as they move through the world marked by racial, social, and gender discrimination. This paper delves into the journey of resistance and defiance that takes these characters from oppression to empowerment, and from both individually and collectively toward self-realization and their determination to stand with dignity and claim their identity. The transformation in their lives is hard-earned, often accompanied by immense loss and bloodshed. Finally, the paper explored the recurring theme of transformation in Gaines’ novels, focused on the personal and collective efforts of these characters to rise from their circumstances and assert their place in society.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW AND BACKGROUND

Ernest J. Gaines, an American author, was born and raised on a Louisiana plantation, which serves as the backdrop of many of his novels. His ancestors were slaves on the plantation, and coming from such a lineage, Gaines intimately understood the lives and struggles of Black people in that environment. His personal experiences living there with his parents and siblings, witnessing oppression, hard labor, and segregation alongside his family, deeply influenced his writing. These early experiences allowed him to create authentic characters and situations, rooted in the realities of plantation life. “One of the major goals of Gaines is to tell the stories of the people he knew, people whose voices were absent from literature and history until he began writing” (Teutsch & Henry, 2015, p. 511). His novels are set against the racism, economic hardship, and social divisions, focusing on the Black community’s struggle for dignity and freedom across generations. Rather than portraying his characters as passive victims of oppression, Gaines emphasizes their resilience, as they rise against the white community and find ways to be strong enough in their plea from the

depressed state on the plantation. In this process, some characters sacrifice their lives, paving the way for others to achieve freedom.

The select four novels—*Catherine Carimer* (1964), *Of Love and Dust* (1967), *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971), and *A Gathering of Old Men* (1983) — share similar themes with unique stories about the Black community, touching on love, the fight for freedom and equality, the struggle for dignity, and the power of collective unity. Another sort is that “Gaines captures the agonized life of the Blacks who were denied the basic rights as ‘men’” (Shoba, 2018, p. 5). Moreover, rather than an individual’s heroism and struggle in life, it is the collective action of Black people readers witness in the novels of Gaines. The landscape of the novels provides a platform for both oppression and transformation, with empowerment emerging through these struggles. Gaines’ narratives also depict a deep connection between the Black people and the land or the plantations where they labor and suffer. It focuses on empowerment and the breaking of racial barriers, with a particular emphasis on the role of women in resisting oppression. “The heroic representation of male characters is conjoined with empowering female figures that resist or defy the politics of an annihilating patriarchy and racial domination as well” (N’Guessan, 2016, p. 2820).

Several studies have been carried out on the novels of Ernest J. Gaines, offered valuable insights into various aspects of his novels. Notable findings include the theme of discrimination against blacks in America beyond isolated experiences (Sara et al., 2019), structural racism among African Americans (Gwendolyn & Mozella, 2020), Black men’s unity in resisting white oppression (Shoba, 2018), female subjectivity in Gaines’ narratives (N’Guessan, 2016), his distinctive narrative style and portrayal of authority (Lee, 2018), the influence of southern codes on the psyche of white characters (Matthew & Katharine, 2015), the portrayal of oppressed manhood (Fay, 2004), courage and dignity in the face of adversity (Rosa et al., 2022), the process of identity formation (Pinesett, 2013), the life of Black labor after the Civil War (Jay, 1991), and the historical context of African American experiences (Mulvey, 2006).

III. THE OPPRESSED LIFE OF BLACK PEOPLE

Black people in the novels of Ernest J. Gaines live on the Louisiana plantations where they are subjected to both physical and psychological violence at the hands of white-dominated society. They are treated as mere slaves, sold to landlords without consent, and viewed as submissive beings. “Individual humans are the creators and consumers of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, but the policies and practices that lie at the heart of systemic racism” (Mahzarin et al., 2021, p. 2). Gaines’ works highlight the oppressive laws that entrap Black people in debt and maintain their subjugation. The suppressed lives of the Blacks lead them to aspire to white equality, and some even begin to distance themselves from their community people in an attempt to emulate white society.

In the novel *Catherine Carimer* (1964), the second protagonist, a woman is from a Black community, but she is pressured by her father that she should associate with and integrate into white society, even to the extent of marriage. Her sister decided to be brought up as a Creole and has been taught to “hate blacks” (Gaines, 1964, p. 48). Catherine’s love for Jackson Bradley, a Black man and childhood friend, is met with disapproval from her father. Catherine is torn between her love for Jackson and her inability to defy her father’s wishes. The root of her dilemma lies in the fact that both she and Jackson are Black, and in their world, being Black is seen as a mark of inferiority, with people equating skin color with social dignity. The internal conflict reveals the painful reality that the oppression faced by Black individuals is not solely inflicted by whites but can also come from within their community. Jackson is hated by Raoul Carimer, a fellow Black community member, which illustrates that some Black people internalize societal prejudice, further deepening the struggle. Thus, Gaines portrays how racial oppression extends beyond external forces, affecting relationships within the Black community itself.

In *Of Love and Dust* (1967), Ernest J. Gaines presents a distinct portrayal of the power struggle between Blacks and Whites on the Louisiana plantation, with both sides engaging in a war to assert dominance. While white people control the plantation and assert their authority over Black workers, Black individuals express their overt acts of resistance whenever possible. As a part of their protests, Black people try to express their power by any means necessary. However, they are kept subjugated by the relentless control of the white landowners. In this novel, the characters Jim Kelly and Marcus, who are Black men, represent two different responses to this oppression; that is, one obeys the whites and the other tries to protest. Jim Kelly is quiet and disciplined, accepting his subservient role, and, despite their demeaning treatment, he follows the commands of his white overseers. “Anybody who sees his face feels like he ought to use it” (Gaines, 1967, p. 148). His agony and internal struggle are revealed when he reflects on Marcus’ defiant behavior, recognizing a desire for resistance yet feeling resigned to his own passive approach. This illustrates how some Black people, in the face of constant oppression, adapt to a life of submission, finding ways to cope with their degraded status under white dominance. Meanwhile, “The opinion thus works through a tautology whereby members of one race were imported as slaves due to the race’s inferior status, and its inferior status is proved by the fact that its members are slaves” (Bergner, 2019, p. 450).

Similarly, the oppressive realities of Black people’s lives are revealed through the experiences of freed slaves in the novel *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971). The people are waiting for the one who will give them real freedom. It is clear through the lines, “Anytime a child is born, the old people look in his face and ask him if he’s the One” (Gaines, 1971). On the beginning of the novel, recently freed slaves eagerly set out in search of a new life, only to have their hopes dashed. Unfortunately, on their way, ex-soldiers patrolling the area violently destroy their whole

freedom and take their lives without hesitation, even killing innocent children. This stark portrayal highlights the callousness with which white society views Black lives, stripping them of their newly gained freedom and reinforcing their subordinate status. The protagonist, Jane, witnesses the tragic existence of her fellow Black community members as she moves from place to place, constantly confronting the brutal realities of their oppression.

In *A Gathering of Old Men* (1983), Ernest J. Gaines further explores the oppressed life of the Black people through the murder of a white man named Beau Boutan, which leads to a severe investigation by Sheriff Mapes. The Black men under suspicion, despite their numbers, are subjected to extreme physical and psychological torment by the sheriff, unable to defend themselves or resist his authority. Their forced compliance underscores the power imbalance between Black and white individuals, where Black people must either remain silent or accept the blame imposed by the white establishment. The novel starkly portrays how deeply entrenched white domination is, with Black individuals left powerless under the control of white landowners and officials. Similarly, “In the novel *A Gathering of Old Men*, Ernest J. Gaines offers the perspective of multiple generations, ages, and races to show how some have dealt with life post-civil movements and post-slavery” (Lee, 2018, p. 3).

IV. PERSONAL AND COLLECTIVE TRANSFORMATION

The personal and collective transformation in Ernest J. Gaines’ novels is evident through various characters in the select novels. Indeed, the author has skillfully portrayed the theme of personal and collective transformation, illustrating how both individuals and communities move from oppression to empowerment. In these novels, the characters experience the profound changes physically and mentally, which they exposed through acts of resistance against the societal structures that have oppressed them for generations. These transformations are not limited only to the individual but also to the community as a whole, which undergoes a drastic change, challenging and destabilizing the systems of dominance imposed on Black people.

Though the “... slaves were seen as non-human savages and yet made to take care of the children and homes. The enslaved Africans were also seen to have lesser mental capacities than whites, there is much research that proves that these individuals were smart, strategic, and worked toward their liberation constantly” (Squire et al., 2020, p. 11). Gaines had presented both individual and collective transformation through specific characters and groups, which challenges and alarms the white characters, who are stunned by the strength and power of Black individuals. This change is a direct result of their prolonged suppression and struggle for dignity.

In *Catherine Carimer* (1964), personal transformation is exemplified through the character of Jackson Bradley, who, after receiving an education in the North, adopts new manners and perspectives, distancing himself from the life of his community, which he views as degraded in the eyes of the white people. When he enters into the native plantation, he experiences inner conflict as he struggles to reconcile his new identity with the oppressive environment of his origins. Although he successfully achieves personal transformation, he fails to inspire change within his broader community. His journey illustrated the personal transformation is fully realized only after he separates himself from the oppressive conditions of his native environment.

In *Of Love and Dust* (1967), Marcus Pyne undergoes a remarkable personal transformation, demonstrating his defiance against white authority at every turn. His transformation is deeply connected to his resistance against his status as a laborer on the plantation. In an act of rebellion, Marcus engages in an affair with a white woman, using this relationship as a tool to provoke and undermine the white landowner. However, his unchecked ambition and defiance lead him to make a fatal mistake, resulting in his tragic death. Through this novel, Gaines symbolically illustrates the consequences of zealotry. While Marcus’ rebellion stems from the oppressed state of his community, his violent transformation and reckless decisions ultimately lead to his downfall. In *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971), Gaines links an individual’s transformation with the broader transformation of the Black community. It traces the struggle of African Americans from slavery through the Civil Rights Movement. Jane Pittman’s transformation from an ordinary slave worker to a community leader reflects his shift. Through education and leadership, Jane boldly opposes white authority and educates others, embodying the resilience and strength of her people.

A Gathering of Old Men (1983) highlights both personal and collective transformation. In this novel, Charlie represents personal transformation, while the group of old Black men stands for collective transformation. In common, all their changes bring development in the lives of Black people. Charlie’s transformation is sudden and dramatic. After killing Beau, he unexpectedly confesses his crime with newfound boldness. His change is shocking to the Black community, who had known him as humble and quiet. At the same time, his courage unites the Black men in opposition to white oppression. This novel illustrates the power of unity, as these elderly men stand together to protect and support Mathu. Each of them takes responsibility for the white man Beau’s murder without thinking about the consequences. The title itself reflects the novel’s central theme of transformation, marking the significant moment that reclaims the voices and agency of the silenced and marginalized. Their collective resistance signals a critical moment of empowerment for the entire Black community.

The personal and collective transformation of the characters mentioned is achieved only through the sacrifice of many lives, whether in their generation or those preceding them. Characters such as Marcus Pyne, Jackson Bradley, and Charlie experience personal transformation as a result of enduring numerous hardships and distancing themselves from oppressive environments. Collective transformation, on the other hand, emerges from the shared sense of oppression on

the Black community and the recognition of a courageous individual between the group, who inspires unity and resistance.

The collective transformation in the novels of Ernest J. Gaines is notable as it brings a drastic change in the generational systems of oppression. The shared courage and vision against entrenched societal rules is no easy feat, but when it occurs, it is often the result of deep-seated wounds and shared suffering. The unity of the Black community reflects their courage to face the challenges, even when they are prepared to sacrifice their lives. Their resistance against white authority is a difficult endeavor, one that could bring greater hardship to the entire community if the rebellion fails. The collective resistance shows their determination to attain freedom, safeguard their dignity, and assert their humanity. In the select novels, Gaines empowered the entire Black community, showing their strength to stand against oppressive forces. While collective transformation is not mentioned specifically in the novel *Catherine Carimer* (1964), the struggle of the Creole people for identity deeply influences the protagonist, Jackson Bradley, compelling him to assert his power within the white community. The novel focuses on individual struggles, the collective mindset of the Creole people impacts the characters' personal transformations and highlighted the importance of communal influence.

In *Of Love and Dust* (1967), the theme of collective transformation is subtle, serving as an underlying force for the changes in the life of the main character, Marcus Pyne. Although Marcus Pyne stands alone in his defiance against the oppressive sharecropping system, the entire community shares his suffering under white exploitation, providing indirect support for his resistance. In *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971), collective action takes center stage. Several characters become deeply involved in the Civil Rights Movement, fighting for equality and justice. Individual transformation in the novel leads to collective change, as the Black community unites in the movement. Jane Pittman and Jimmy Aaron are particularly notable for their roles in this transformation. The novel portrays both older and younger generations working together, with the wisdom and experience of the elders complementing the energy, determination, and courage of the younger generation. This intergenerational unity brings about meaningful social change within the Black community, despite the power of the white establishment. Gaines emphasizes that sustained effort and commitment over time lead to gradual but inevitable transformation.

The most powerful depiction of collective action in Ernest J. Gaines' works is presented in *A Gathering of Old Men* (1983). This novel revolves around the collective resistance of elderly Black men against the oppressive dominance of white society. The central plot focuses on a group of these elderly Black men coming together to protect Mathu, one of their community men, who is falsely accused of committing a murder. For generations, the Black community had been subjected to fear, subjugation, and humiliation at the hands of white society. It is clear through the words of Cherry that "the very same land we had worked, our people had worked, our people's people had worked since the time of slavery" (Gaines, 1983, p. 43). However, through their united stand, they reclaim their agency and assert their right to equality. Each man takes responsibility for the murder, confusing the white authorities and forcing them to confront the united front of the Black community. When Sheriff asks Mathu about it, he says, "I can't make nobody say what they don't want to say. A man got to do what he thinks is right, Sheriff" (Gaines, 1983, p. 85). This novel powerfully illustrates the strength of unity that enables these men, who lack individual power to challenge white dominance, to gain collective power and assert their dignity through shared action.

The collective action portrayed in Ernest J. Gaines' novels show the necessity of being united and the profound changes it can bring, both individually and collectively. It demonstrates that by standing together, one can achieve what seems to be impossible. Unity empowers the characters, transforming them from passive and fearful individuals into active and empowered agents of change. The collective stand taken by the Black community sends a powerful message to the white oppressors that the era of their domination is coming to an end, and the Black people are rising above marginalization. Through his novels, Gaines emphasizes that while individual transformation holds great significance, collective transformation has even greater potential to bring the change more swiftly, leading to real empowerment and resistance.

In the novels of Ernest J. Gaines, the role of women played a pivotal role in shaping their personal survival and empowerment of their communities. His female characters possess a unique strength that significantly contributes to the community's struggle for dignity and freedom. These women display remarkable courage in confronting racism and often serve as the backbone of their communities. Women characters in Gaines' novels undergo sacrifices to achieve what they aim for. Their struggle and sacrifices play a transformative role in driving collective empowerment. Characters such as Catherine in *Catherine Carimer* (1964), Pauline Bonbon in *Of Love and Dust* (1967), Jane Pittman and Big Laura in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971), and Candy Marshall in *A Gathering of Old Men* (1983) are instrumental in bringing change to the Black community. These women exhibit the same determination as the men in standing up to white oppression and supporting their community. For instance, Catherine's internal conflict between her father and her love for Jackson Bradley highlights her courage as she ultimately makes the difficult decision to stand by her lover, defying her father's wishes. This illustrates the power and resolve of women, even in the face of an oppressed society.

Pauline Bonbon is a white woman engaged in a relationship with a Black man, Marcus, in a society where such unions are fraught with danger. While a White man having a relationship with a Black woman is socially accepted, the reverse is often viewed as a punishable crime. Despite being aware of the risks involved, Pauline exhibits remarkable courage by pursuing her affair with Marcus, a Black laborer. The incidents that unfold in their relationship show how

women's passion and desires are heavily influenced and controlled by racial and gender differences. Though their relationship reaches a tragic end, Pauline mourns for Marcus and cherishes his memory. Her decision to be with a Black man reflects her defiance against the limitations imposed by her white community, which seeks to control women's choices. Through her love for Marcus, Pauline reveals her boldness and determination to break free from the societal chains that bind her.

Jane Pittman and Big Laura are notable female characters who lead their Black community people towards their freedom. Big Laura, an elderly woman, guides her people as they attempt to escape from the oppressive plantation where they live. With her age and experience, Laura has endured immense suffering and cruelty at the hands of white people, which drives her transformation and determination to bring change to her community. Though she dies during their journey, her leadership leaves a lasting impact, and the group continues to follow the path she laid for them. Jane Pittman, who has lived on the plantation since childhood, experiences many struggles inflicted by white oppression. Inspired by Laura's leadership, Jane continues to show the same courage, even after Laura's death. She takes responsibility for Ned, a young boy, working tirelessly on the plantation to support his education. Jane's bravery remains stable throughout the novel, allowing her to confront various challenges with resilience. Her fearless nature leads her to participate boldly in the Civil Rights Movement. Jane's life is a testament to her attempts to escape slavery, seek freedom, and resist white oppression, demonstrating her perseverance and unwavering commitment to justice.

Candy Marshall, a white woman, shows compassion for the Black community and helps them unite in their stand against white oppression. She plays an important role in rallying the elderly Black men together, guiding them to show their collective strength. Her deep concern for Mathu, who is accused of killing a white man, makes her defy the racial structures of her community. Candy's morality and courage compel her to challenge the oppressive structures of white authority. In spite of the hardships of crisis, violence and exploitation, and economic insecurity, Candy and Miss Merle maintain their moral integrity and stand with the Black community. Candy's actions, especially her defiance of racial expectations, highlight her sense of justice and loyalty. Through these women characters, Gaines emphasizes the vital role of female courage in their empowerment and resistance of the Black community, showing how their strength contributes to the larger struggle for dignity and justice.

V. CONCLUSION

The overall findings of this paper are that the select novels depict the racial, social, and psychological struggles faced by Black individuals on Louisiana plantations. The main theme is the power of individual and collective action, as characters resist white oppression through solidarity within their community. Gaines also highlights the conflicts within the Black community apart from the struggles they face from the White people. The role of women in the transformation is notable as they stand first to fight against both racial and gender oppression. The novels emphasize the journey of self-discovery and the pursuit of dignity involving personal sacrifices and inner conflicts.

Gaines has clearly portrayed the oppression, struggle, and empowerment of the Black community in his novels, which give a message that the change comes from the inner mind of a person or people with stubbornness and courage. This empowerment does not know the sex of a person because women are as equal as men. Ernest J. Gaines's novels offer a nuanced exploration of the journey from oppression to empowerment, emphasizing both resistance to external forces and personal and collective growth. His characters reflect the ongoing struggle for identity, freedom, and justice, positioning his work as a significant contribution to the broader discourse on race, power, and transformation in African American literature. While individual characters often face tremendous obstacles when acting alone, they find strength through collective action. Whether through organized activism or spontaneous solidarity, they can challenge and sometimes overcome the oppressive forces set against them. Gaines's portrayal of collective action emphasizes the importance of unity for any community seeking to resist exploitation, racism, or injustice. In his works, collective action serves not only as a means of survival but also as a powerful tool for driving social change and reclaiming human dignity. Through this, Gaines highlights the transformative power of solidarity in the face of oppression.

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