

THE QUEST FOR BLACK MASCULINITY IN ERNEST GAINES'S *A GATHERING OF OLD MEN*¹

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Abstract

In *A Gathering of Old Men*, Ernest Gaines throws light on the quest for black masculinity which consists in showing their intrinsic qualities as men enabling them not only to resist but also to foil the power of the white administration which dominates and exploits them. They first succeed in overcoming the old social order that marginalises and excludes them from the environment they live in. Having obtained the same rights as Whites, they now challenge and overthrow heroically the white administration to build an egalitarian and harmonious society in which their rights and advantages are guaranteed by the law.

Key words: Quest, Masculinity, Old Social Order, Challenge, Heroism

Résumé

Dans *A Gathering of Old Men*, Ernest Gaines met en lumière la quête de la masculinité des Noirs qui consiste à montrer leurs qualités intrinsèques en tant qu'hommes leur permettant non seulement de résister, mais également de faire échec au pouvoir de l'administration blanche qui les domine et les exploite. Ils réussissent d'abord à surmonter l'ancien ordre social qui les marginalise et les exclut de l'environnement où ils vivent. Ayant obtenu les mêmes droits que les Blancs, ils défient maintenant et renversent héroïquement l'administration blanche pour construire une société égalitaire et harmonieuse dans laquelle leurs droits et leurs avantages sont garantis par la loi.

Mots-clés: Quête, Masculinité, Ordre Social Ancien, Défi, Héroïsme

¹ Ernest Gaines, *A Gathering of Old Men*, New York: Vintage, 1983.

Thenceforth, any citation appearing in this work will be from this edition and will be indicated with the initials AGOM, standing for *A Gathering of Old Men*, and followed by the page number of the quoted passage.

Introduction

African-American writers through their literary works are committed to stand up for Black people who are oppressed in a white racist environment. Their goal is to describe with accurateness and denounce the difficult living and working conditions of Blacks in order to draw a worldwide attention on their fate. Ernest Gaines is among these writers who used to depict with caustic remarks inhuman treatments inflicted to Blacks. His novels are read as reactions against the dehumanization of Blacks. That is how his narratives purport to give them dignity and social importance in their communities.

A Gathering of Old Men, is a story of Black characters, particularly men who have undergone social and economic domination in a white racist environment. The white dominant society in which they live is one that exerts a total and complete control of them, as a system consisting in depriving them of their human rights in such a way that they cannot have any social progress. Subjugated in that white racist system, black men are infantilized, bullied and ill-treated. Because black protagonists in the novel are wiped out, they have the feeling that they are not human beings. Becoming aware of the seriousness of their situation, they go against the white system to search for their masculinity in terms of intrinsic qualities such as courage, heroism, dauntlessness and intelligence. These qualities permit them to take an active part in the telling of their own stories and in the fighting for equal rights.

The purpose of this paper is to show how the quest for black masculinity is deployed in *A Gathering of Old Men*, and indicate its usefulness in a racist environment. To analyze the quest for Black masculinity, in *A Gathering of Old Men*, we will use deconstruction as literary theory. This theory deals with the deconstruction of a text, meaning that it reverses the polarity of common binary oppositions like White/Black so that the latter term is regarded as the more desirable. According to Jacques Derrida, deconstructive reading "must always aim at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the pattern of language he uses....It attempts to make the not-seen accessible to sight"(Of Grammatology, 1974, p. 158).

We apply deconstruction to Gaines's *A Gathering of Old Men* to challenge stereotyped images that Whites ascribe to Blacks who are presented as powerless, coward and unskilful. Gaines's fiction goes against that ideology and reverses the negative perceptions that Whites have about Blacks. The narrative chronicles the way the black characters come to gain social postures other than the ones they were attributed when they are subjugated, dominated and reduced to silence. These Blacks are now perceived as courageous and determined persons ready to overcome and wipe out white supremacy emphasizing that they are also human beings endowed with intrinsic values.

To assess the quest for black masculinity in *A Gathering of Old Men*, we will first deal with the changes that take place in the type of society described in the novel. With the assertion of their masculinity, the environment they live in is transformed in ways that the old social order is defied and subverted. Secondly, the argument is to throw light on the quest for masculinity as a challenge to white repressive system. Challenging the white system means for Blacks freeing themselves from white authority. Acquiring this freedom entails dangers that Blacks have to face heroically.

1. Changes

The setting in *A Gathering of Old Men* is the South. Changes occur in this area through the Blacks' self-determination forcing Whites to take into account their aspirations and preoccupations in decision-making. The changes termed as black masculinity are apparent when the characters are neither ignored nor reduced to silence. One of the noteworthy changes that take place in the southern society is the disappearance of the old social order that has systematically excluded Blacks from the mainstream society.

1.1. The disappearance of the old social order

In *A Gathering of Old Men*, Ernest Gaines shows that the quest for black masculinity is expressed through their struggle against the old social order that prevailed in the South where black codes were strict laws detailing when, where and how freed slaves could work, and for how much compensation. The codes appeared throughout the South as legal provisions that aim to put black citizens into indentured servitude, take voting rights away, control where they lived, maintain their children for labour purposes and control any movements.

The story in the novel begins with the murder of the plantation's Cajun work boss, Beau Boutan by a black man. Everybody fears the arrival of Fix to seek revenge, since the murdered man is his own son. Fix embodies the old social order in so far as he used to lead lynch mobs against the Blacks in the area. Unfortunately for Fix, he does not have the opportunity to perpetuate that social order because of the gathering of old men on the plantation with guns. Dreading a bloody confrontation between Fix's crew and Blacks, the local Sheriff prevents Fix from coming to the place when he says: "I don't want any trouble in this place... there's law against harbouring a murder too" (AGOM, 73). Preferring law to a barbaric retaliation, Mapes, the Sheriff symbolizes change and revival in the relationships between Whites and Blacks in the southern society.

The first symbol represented by the Sheriff through the disappearance of the old social order is unity between Whites and Blacks. Attaching importance to law leads to a peaceful and harmonious society favourable to development. Respecting and applying law fairly is a key factor of concord and understanding between social groups living side by side in a society. Whites and Blacks can live in a peaceful atmosphere only if their behaviour is governed by the law.

The second symbol embodied by the Sheriff is the birth of a new southern society based on tolerance and forgiveness. Usually, when a Black insults, attacks or kills white people, he is imprisoned, lynched or sentenced to death. It is the case of Jefferson in *A Lesson before Dying* (E. Gaines, 1993). In that novel, Jefferson is sentenced to death because he is suspected to have killed a white man. But in the case of Mathu in *A Gathering of Old Men*, the Sheriff neither decides to lynch, nor imprison nor to sentence him to death. He advocates the legal settlement of the problem, that is to say the enforcement of the law. Through his white character, Mapes, Ernest Gaines shows that the old social order prevailing in the South based on terror is no longer in force. This is why the Sheriff carefully moves Fix Boutan far from the scene of crime to make him understand that the southern society has started a process of change. In fact, the Sheriff finds it not necessary to persecute Blacks simply because of their race. He represents moderate Whites who have no fear for change and accept Blacks as equal. This is why in the novel he is very often opposed to other Whites like Luke Will who is the symbol of the white racist society. Luke Will and his crew usually lead actions against Blacks. They put snakes in their churches and turn over black school buses. Beau Boutan who has been murdered is not presented as a gentle character. He is associated with violent actions like raping and killing Blacks. He thinks that using violence is the best way to subjugate Blacks. In the conflict that opposed him to Charlie with whom he works on Marshall Plantation, Beau Boutan shoots Charlie with a shotgun believing that it is an appropriate response to Charlie who hits him with sugar cane. Fearing that Beau prepares to kill him, Charlie shoots him down. The Sheriff's lenient attitude does not consist in justifying the murder, but in showing that Beau's logic of violence is misguided, racist and outdated. His attitude is due to the pressure that Blacks exert on him. In fact, he is not destroying the southern society, but he is adapting it to a new order. The Sheriff's conception of the new order meets Barbara Johnson's definition of deconstruction indicating that "deconstruction is not synonymous with destruction. It is much closer to the original meaning of the word analysis, which etymologically means to undo" (The Critical Difference, 1980, p. 5).

The sheriff undoes the system of violence that is no longer fitting into the new social order. That is why he prevents Whites from retorting. The progressive disappearance of the old social order mostly based on violence and barbarism against Blacks is partly due to the quest for black masculinity illustrated through

Charlie. Known as a weak and impotent man, Charlie becomes completely transformed when it is discovered that he killed Beau Boutan. He symbolizes the strong realization of black masculinity that leads to a new social order.

A part from the progressive disappearance of the old social order based on extreme violence against Blacks following their new masculinity, racial harmony appears as another positive aspect ensuing from their fight.

1.2. Racial harmony as a result of the quest

A Gathering of Old Men insists on the fact that a good understanding between Whites and Blacks goes through a strengthening of social cohesion characterized by racial harmony. That racial harmony resulting from black assertion for their masculinity will enable Blacks and Whites to live together peacefully rather than fighting. The revival and change of the southern society according to the fiction are illustrated through the characters of Gilbert Boutan and Calvin Harrison. Gilbert Boutan is white, the son of Fix Boutan, whereas Calvin Harrison is black. Both of them play in the same football team, Louisiana State University. Their membership of the same team is seen as a major first and astonishing that the narrator states: "it would be the first time this had ever happened, Black and White in the same back-field; and in the deep South besides" (AGOM, 12). This quotation testifies that the process of racial combination of the southern society is on a good way. Gilbert and Calvin get on well with each other within their team that they are nicknamed by the publicity people as "Salt and pepper" (AGOM, 11). Salt is a strong-tasting substance which is used to improve the flavour of food. Pepper is a hot-tasting spice that is also used to flavour food. The mixture of the two substances in a sauce gives a nice and interesting taste. Through the characters of Gilbert (salt) and Calvin (pepper), the novel represents a vision of the new social order exemplified through harmonious racial relations. The greatness of Gilbert and Calvin as famous football players depends on their interaction within their team. The national press covering the game reports that: "there was no possible way to stop Salt and Pepper" (AGOM, 112). There is no possibility to stop "Salt" and "Pepper" means that they play so well that their victory over their opponents is absolutely certain. Their victory over the Ole Miss suggests that the southern society has started a change that is irreversible. It points out the possibility of interracial harmony in the South.

Like "Salt" and "Pepper", the relationship between the Sheriff of Bayonne, Mapes and Mathu (a black man) also testifies that racial harmony is feasible. The Sheriff is responsible for investigating the murder of Beau Boutan, a white man. Mathu is suspected of having killed Beau Boutan, because the latter is found dead in his house. But the relationship between the two persons turn quickly from animosity to friendship. Noticing Mathu's masculinity, that is his qualities (of self-control, humility, honesty and courage), he cannot but respect and admire him. Their friendship becomes so deep and strong that they take part in a fishing party. From that fishing party following their friendship, Gaines points out the fact that Blacks and Whites can learn from each other and accordingly can work together to establish a prosperous society that is beneficial to all. Having acquaintances outside the boundary of race is a perfect example of racial harmony.

Racial harmony depicted in the novel continues with the judge, Reynolds who presides over the jury during the trial after the deadly confrontation between Whites and Blacks. At the conclusion of that confrontation, two white people, Beau and Luke Will and a black man, Charlie were killed. After three days, the jury deliberated and returned the verdict: "the Judge places all the defendants, both Blacks and Whites, on probation for five years" (AGOM, 213).

Probation is a period of time during which a person who has committed a crime has to obey the law and be supervised by the probation officer, rather than being sent to prison. According to Maria Hebert-Leiter, that discharging of both Blacks and Whites "erases the lynching ritual's power over this particular community and making African Americans and White Louisianians equal in the eyes of the law" (2006, p. 109).

The verdict given by the jury testifies that the process of change in the South is really on its way. A verdict that does not condemn Blacks and clears Whites is fair and shows the advent of a biracial society. A society in which both Blacks and Whites have equal rights recognized by the law. If the southern society has reached a state where the law does not give more advantages to Whites than Blacks, this is due to the fact that Blacks have a clear conscience that they are as valuable as Whites. They too, can participate in the progress of their society and must be accepted by Whites without referring to their race. They must no longer be seen as inferior and useless individuals, but as brave men. It is this significant change of their status as men that has resulted in racial harmony.

Racial harmony constitutes one of the key facts indicating that the southern society, and beyond the whole American society is changing. This change is also perceived through compassion Blacks receive from Whites.

1.3. Compassion as a sign of change

In *A Gathering of Old Men*, Gaines shows that some white people show pity, sympathy and understanding for Blacks who are suffering. That compassion proceeds from Blacks' qualitative transformation. Previously seen as unskilful, they now appear as adults with intrinsic values in terms of their capacities to work for the development of their society. That change from a widely known incompetence to ability is illustrated through one of Gaines' character, Mathu.

The story in the novel begins when Candy, a white woman sends a black boy, Snookun to gather everybody at Mathu's house because a white man is found dead there. Fearing an immediate retaliation of white racist mobs, Candy calls together all the Blacks living on Marshall plantation at Mathu's house to prevent white racists from lynching him. Mathu has been useful to Candy in the past. He almost appears as her father in so far as he literally raised her since the death of her own parents. Next, Mathu taught Candy the structure of the plantation until she takes total control of it. Mathu's attitude towards Candy is out of the ordinary because it was not easy for a black man to substitute himself for a white child's parents in a racist environment. Mathu has succeeded in transmitting a good education to Candy until she becomes adult and take the control of her parents' plantation. The success of Mathu is the one of the whole black community. Through him, Gaines points out that Blacks are valuable enough to bring children up. He insists on the fact that black culture involves useful social and moral values to form the mentality of any individual for his integration in the society. This is why Candy feels closer to Mathu and decides to protect him for the essential role he has played in her life. Mathu can be compared to Son in *Tar Baby* (T. Morrison, 1981).

Morrison's protagonist is mistreated, neglected and marginalized. But he succeeds in inverting the situation by becoming his master's teacher. He shows his intrinsic values so that he becomes unavoidable for the wellbeing and the survival of his master, Valerian Street.

Candy is grateful to Mathu this is why she decides to protect him when he is suspected to have killed Beau Boutan. When the Sheriff investigates the crime to find the murderer, Candy confesses her guilt. Noticing the inhuman treatment that the Sheriff inflicts on the Blacks on the plantation, she asks him: "Because they're Black and helpless, is that why you're picking on them?" (AGOM, 67). Candy, the white woman expresses the necessity for the Sheriff to understand his racist attitudes by showing him that he shares complicity in maintaining racism as the bedrock of the society they live in. She urges him to dismantle white supremacy and deconstruct racist structures. Candy's sentiments for the Sheriff indicating her reluctance against his attitudes are the same as Diangelo's sentiments to white people. She reserves her harshest criticism for white liberals, whom she sees as refusing to acknowledge their own participation in racist systems when she writes: "If we cannot discuss these dynamics or see ourselves within them, we cannot stop participating in racism. The good/bad binary made it effectively impossible for the average white people to understand racism" (R. Diangelo, 2018, p. 72).

Candy sides with Blacks not simply because she sympathizes with their suffering, but she wants the Sheriff to understand that a new social order requires the advent of a peaceful and harmonious society in

which Blacks and Whites have the same rights and are equal before the law. While discussing with Miss Merle, the owner of the local plantation about the situations of Blacks, Candy tells her that she will at all costs protect them: "I won't let them harm my people, I will protect my people. My daddy and all them before him did, and I" (AGOM, 19). Candy's decision to prevent white racists from harming Blacks is to perpetuate a long tradition that has been in favour of Blacks. This is why the week after the gunfire between Blacks and Whites, she hires her own lawyer to defend Blacks during the trial. Her attitude testifies to the changes that are taking place in the southern society and beyond in the whole American society. Standing by Blacks, Candy shows that racism and its corollaries like discrimination and segregation are being overcome in the new social order. Through Candy, a white woman's character who shows solidarity with Blacks, Gaines highlights the fact that Blacks have acquired a new status in the quest for their masculinity. They are no longer seen as inferior beings who are ignored, neglected and marginalized. Having the compassion from Whites is the recognition of their status as human beings. That recognition of their status as human beings is due to the expression of their qualities that are profitable to the society they live in.

After having fought to obtain changes that enable them to live peacefully side by side with Whites, Blacks challenge the remnants of the white repressive system.

2. Black masculinity challenging the white system

In *A Gathering of Old Men*, Blacks go against the white racist system by overcoming obstacles that previously prevented them from exerting their full rights as human beings. That attitude following from the quest for their masculinity presents them as heroes.

2.1. Heroism as a key factor of challenge

In *A Lesson before Dying*, Ernest Gaines deals with heroism with a particular attention because most of his black characters are in their seventies or eighties. Generally, at this age, people are no longer sharp and nimble. But Gaines' old black characters are driven by an extraordinary vivacity so that the members of the society they live in are astonished seeing their heroism facing adversity. They are determined to fight Whites because at this age, they have nothing else to lose. When the news of Beau's death spread like wildfire, they gathered at Mathu's house armed with guns thinking that the white racist mob will retaliate because Mathu is suspected to have killed a white man. They seize Beau's murder to redeem themselves before they die. That act of redemption comes from the heroically standing up like men instead of behaving like fearful individuals. They know that standing up to local whites often leads to physical torture and death. Yet, they feel empowered to stand up as they never have done before. One of them, Johnny Paul draws the attention of Mapes, the Sheriff who tells him: "you're trying to be hero today" (AGOM, 73). Johnny replies saying: "we had cracked usself for a fight, and we wanted usself a fight" (AGOM, 73). Johnny's argument is deeply touching because these old men decide finally to do something brave. They have a fierce determination now to show their power. Through their willingness to act with no fear, they express the need to assert their masculinity. When the rifle shooting begins, Whites on the plantation were all astonished to see that Blacks have guns and are shouting at them. They cannot understand how Blacks become so brave. Leroy, one of the white racists who came to avenge Beau's murder is amazed by Blacks' dauntlessness when he asks: "I wonder what them niggers been drinking to make all so brave" (AGOM, 204). "Violence is a cleansing force" as Frantz Fanon indicates in his discussion of the relationships between the colonized and the colonizer. "It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect" (1963, p. 94). In the same light, dying or confronting death is a ritual performance, a cleansing means, a more radical claim for self-assertion. Facing death becomes a proof of humanity for the old men.

The bravery of Black men ended in their victory, since the Sheriff representing the white administration is shot down during the gun fire. He crawls on the ground in an unrecognizable state. The narrator reveals the Sheriff's feeling of faintness when he says: "he sounded weaker than he did before" (AGOM, 205).

The weakening of the sheriff embodying the white administration symbolizes the weakness of the white power. Blacks have become so heroic that they succeed in restoring their lost identity and their power. All the Blacks on the plantation are no longer coward, but two of them, Mathu and Charlie are marked out by their particular heroism.

Mathu is suspected by the Sheriff to have killed Beau not because Beau is found dead in Mathu's house, but that suspicion is due to the fact that Mathu is honored and respected by the Sheriff who considers him as "a real man" (AGOM, 84). He means by "a real man" the only black man who has ever demonstrated his courage to stand up to local whites. For the Sheriff, Mathu used to heat local Whites among whom we have Fix Boutan, the father of Beau. Fix Boutan is feared by local Blacks for his violent actions against them. He represents the southern patriarchal society that uses violence and terror to maintain its honor and its authority. Beating that dreadful white man, Mathu puts an end to the authority of Whites. This is why he is celebrated as a hero not only by Blacks but also by Whites. As for Charlie, another black character, he works closely with Beau Boutan. He was previously known as a coward and fearful person. But Charlie's personality becomes completely redefined when it is established that he is the culprit of Beau's death. He is imbued with a new courage that the other Blacks admire. Charlie is killed during the shooting, but he dies as a martyr. He represents the ultimate black male's transformation.

The heroism exhibited by Mathu and Charlie has the same extent as the one displayed by Ned in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (E. Gaines, 1971). In that novel, Ned Douglass decides to build a school on the plantation where they live in order to teach other Blacks, because he has noticed that the lack of knowledge constitutes a great obstacle that prevents them from making progress. Despite the strict prohibition of the white administration on building that school, Ned insists on doing it. Following his stubbornness, the white authorities hire a sniper to kill him. Ned dies heroically for the better of his community since the building of the school ends soon after his death. Like Ned, Mathu and Charlie symbolize the realization of black masculinity.

In *A Gathering of Old Men*, the heroism of Blacks is not the only means that challenges the power of the white administration. Their union and cohesion that lead to a perfect understanding constitute another asset to overcome the obstacles set by the white power.

2.2. Union as a means of resistance

In *A Gathering of Old Men*, Gaines shows that unity within the black community appears as a strength enabling them to resist and even to fail white attempts to subjugate them. When the news of Beau's murder spread, Snookum, a black boy went from house to house to inform the local Blacks to gather at Mathu's house. That gathering of old black men at Mathu's house constitutes a turning point in the novel because it has two goals.

The first one is to show solidarity with Mathu who is suspected to have committed the murder. Knowing the consequences of such a deed against Whites and fearing the immediate retaliation of white racist mobs, they meet to prevent Mathu from being lynched. When the Sheriff gets to the scene of the crime to investigate, he is surprised to see a group of old men ready to side with Mathu. Although the Sheriff has a suspect, he cannot arrest anyone because each of them confesses that he is the guilty. Facing with their determination, the Sheriff confesses his helplessness when saying: "They all claim the same thing. They all claim they did it" (AGOM, 119). The Sheriff can do nothing even if he still believes that Mathu is the culprit. He is unable to arrest Mathu because the other old men stand by him. Their solidarity constitutes a strength that the Sheriff cannot overcome. Through their act of solidarity, Gaines wants to stress the fact that the unity of the black community is a powerful means to challenge the white repressive

system. The progress realized by Blacks is mainly due to the cohesion that prevails within their group. Generally, that harmony constitutes a power that brings them respect and consideration.

The second goal of old men's gathering at Mathu's house is to dissuade Whites from avenging Beau's murder. Noticing the strong mobilization of black men when the Sheriff gets to the place of crime, he is convinced that they are preparing to take action. The presence of about eighteen black old men with shotguns frightens the Sheriff who exclaims: "So this is payday, huh? And it's all on Fix, huh? Whether he had anything to do with or not, Fix must pay for everything that ever happened to you, huh?" (AGOM, 107). Mapes's observation meets Maria Hebert-Leiter's when she says, "Fix and his family become the scapegoat for all the cruelties the blacks faced in the novel" (M. H. Leiter, 2006, p. 109). Seeing that black old men are ready to fight, he advises Fix and his racist crew not to come to the place to avoid a slaughter. The fear felt by the Sheriff who represents the white administration can be analyzed as the victory of Blacks who are no longer afraid of Fix and his formidable racist group. Union and solidarity enable Blacks to free themselves from Fix's authority. His lack of authority means his old practices based on violence and terror are outdated. His time is past and he represents the old southern order that is dying. The weakening of the white repressive system is a success for Blacks in their struggle against Whites to have equal rights. The success of Blacks in their struggle against the white administration in *A Gathering of Old Men* is mainly felt in social justice. After the gunfire between Blacks and Whites, three people were found dead: two white men and one black man. The sentence given by the judge after the trial was fair. Both Blacks and Whites involved in the incident receive fairly the same punishment. This time the jury composed of only Whites did not clear Whites and blame Blacks. The progress realized on social front is mainly due to their union based on love.

The support that Mathu received from the black community when he was about to be arrested by the Sheriff is based on love. Each of the old men gathered in his house was ready to sacrifice his live to save Mathu. One of Mathu's friend, Beulah told the Sheriff: "if you taking Mathu, you taking me...I'll be ready" (AGOM, 109). In this context, Beau Boutan's death can be considered as a sacrifice, a means of self-recovery, and Beau Boutan therefore, stands as a scapegoat. René Girard analyzes the scapegoat effect as:

A strange process through which two or more people are reconciled at the expense of a third party who appears guilty or responsible for whatever ails, disturbs, or frightens the scapegoaters. They feel relieved of their tensions and they coalesce into a more harmonious group. They now have a single purpose, which is to prevent the scapegoat from harming them, by expelling and destroying him (1996, p. 11).

The support that the black community lends to Mathu to protect him is expressed in terms of love. All the old men gathered in his house undergo in turn the Sheriff's brutality. He either slaps or spits on them to compel them to denounce Mathu. But each was very firm with him preferring to suffer rather than handing over Mathu.

Suffering to save or protect another person is a real prove of love. And black old men succeed in showing that degree of love through the search for their masculinity which brings them pride. That pride constitutes a strength that encourages them to challenge the white system without fear.

2.3. Pride as a means of excelling oneself

In *A Gathering of Old Men*, Gaines deals with the theme of pride as a means to trigger Black masculinity. Pride is a feeling of satisfaction that a person has because he or people around him have done something good. It is mostly a sense of respect that other people have for a person and that a person has for himself.

In the novel, Gaines presents pride as a trigger mechanism that stimulates black people to act effectively facing the obstacles set by white people to show that they are valuable and skillful people. One of his characters, Yank who used to break horses and mules decades ago is still acting like a cowboy in his

seventies. Despite his frequent injuries over the years making him walk leaning forward, he still proudly wears the clothes he wore thirty years ago. One of his friends, Cherry notices Yank's pride when he says: "We was just feeling proud. I could see it on Yank's face. I could feel it sitting next to Chimely and Mat. Proud as we could be" (AGOM, 41). Cherry is proud of Yank in that pride is an emotion that they all seem to feel. Yank in his seventies is not only challenging old age, but he is also challenging white people to show them that he is still sharp, nimble and vigorous. Like Yank in *A gathering of Old Men*, Joe Pittman in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (E. Gaines, 1971), also glorifies proudly the black race breaking skillfully wild stallions. He dies in an attempt to recapture a wild stallion that run away. In doing so, Joes dies nobly fulfilling his potential. Through his action, we perceive the emergence of black masculinity, which in accepting the possibility of death, brings respect and pride to the black community in the same way as Yank.

Mathu, a dark-skinned man also expresses his pride through his skin color when he says: "proud to be African. You know why proud to be African? 'cause they won't let me be a citizen here in this country" (AGOM, 182). Through the quotation above, Mathu shows that he is not a helpless and disappointed man. Even if he is denied the American citizenship, he has another "nationality" that brings him honor and dignity. For him, claiming his African origins is enough not to feel disoriented or to be seen as a stateless person in a new world. He is delighted at the idea that he is an African, meaning that he has an origin, a past and a history. Through Mathu, the author points out that Blacks in America neither feel lost nor alienated, because they come from an environment (Africa) which has a huge culture enabling them to analyze social events according to their own vision. So, they do not perceive the fact of being refused the American citizenship as a failure or despair. On the contrary, they are happy to show white people that as Africans, they are valuable people. This is why Mathu always makes a stand against the white system to show his qualities not only as an African, but also as a human being who deserves respect and consideration. Thus, facing with the determination of the Sheriff in charge of arresting him because of being suspected to have committed a murder, he has never weakened, so that the Sheriff considers him as a "real man" (AGOM, 84). He means a brave and leader. For his courage as African in a white racist environment, he is proudly celebrated by Clatoo, in the black community in these terms: "y'all know I respect this man like I don't respect too many men. He always stood up. Stood up to anybody who tried to do him wrong." (AGOM, 169-170).

Mathu, through his tenacity, expresses pride not only for himself but also for the whole black community. Pride is a feeling that leads a person to act with courage in order to avoid shame. For Mathu, shrinking from the white repressive power is felt as cowardice and failure. This is why driven by his pride he refuses to submit himself to white diktat to point out his masculinity which earns him honors and fame in his living environment.

Conclusion

In a *Gathering of Old Men*, Gaines puts a particular stress on the quest for Black's masculinity. Seen in the past as fearful, cowardly and puppet people who were dominated and exploited by Whites, they now stand as competent people for their self-determination. Highlighting their specific qualities as men, they succeed in turning upside down the old social order set in the South that prevented them from integrating the fabric of the society. With courage, heroism and bravery, they successfully challenge the white repressive system to have the same rights as white people. Having obtained equal and recognized rights, they now live side by side with Whites in a peaceful and harmonious society where laws are equally applied for both Blacks and Whites. This is the goal that Blacks have reached through their masculinity that Gaines shows through his novel, *A Gathering of Old Men*.

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