The Shifting Features of Leadership in Ernest Gaines's *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman.*

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Résumé: L'histoire de la lutte émancipatrice des Noirs aux Etats-Unis a enregistré la contribution des gentes masculine et féminine. La contribution des femmes a pendant longtemps été voilée si bien que les seuls dignes représentants de la race noire étaient pratiquement les hommes. *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* est une revalorisation et une interprétation nouvelle de cette histoire qui longtemps dominée par une idéologie sexiste. La femme est enfermée dans le silence et est invisible non pas parce qu'elle n'a pas de visage, mais plutôt parce qu'elle n'a pas de voix. En lui donnant la parole pour raconter son histoire voire celle de toute la communauté noire dans cette œuvre de fiction, Gaines lui donne une voix, par conséquent, une conscience. C'est la réhabilitation de la gente féminine qui retrouve ainsi la parole, la voix qui, en réalité est l'expression d'une présence, d'un pouvoir.

Mots clés: Histoire, fiction, oralité, narration, leadership, héroïsme, sexisme, autobiographie, africain américain, esclavage, engagement, éducation.

Introduction

African-American theorists and critics of literature have identified revision as a pivotal trope of black fiction. According to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Black American writers inherit two traditions, one Euro-American, the other African-American. More specifically, in *The Signifying Monkey* (1989), Gates describes the "speakerly text" and revision as distinctive features in African American writing, drawing as it does on Euro-American notions of narratives genres (novel, autobiography, etc.) while demonstrating a strong affiliation to an oral tradition rooted in African culture. Building upon Gates' ideas, I will focus on a novel that he briefly mentioned: Ernest Gaines's *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman1*. It is my argument that the interplay of history and fiction in this novel brings to the fore a submerged and changing portrait of African-American leadership or heroism. What makes any man a hero/leader? Is it the special circumstances of his birth, supernatural or moral strength?

Gaines's "historical novel" is a record of the life and struggles of individuals and communities of slaves, of the South of the US, as well as a historical period marking the nadir of Black history. The flow of past events is reconstructed into a narrative account through the oral testimony of the aging protagonist, Miss Jane Pittman. Not only does her story parallels the *history* of the black community, but it also deconstructs the patriarchal, male dominated lens through which African-American history and leadership have often been constructed. By rewriting the slave history from a black woman's perspective and relying primarily on memory and storytelling, Gaines thus revises African American history. In so doing, he empowers matriarchy and orality as respectively a privileged position and narrative mode. In his social vision, women's role is not just that of the midwife, who assist at a birth but is otherwise not essential to it. They are active participants. This recognition of the dynamic role of women in the black struggle for liberation is of paramount importance in that it subverts the predominantly male centered vision of leadership and heroism.

I. Interplay of history and fiction

The AMJP is a work of fiction in which an ex-slave bears witness of the long struggle of African-Americans for racial equality. The rhetoric of the introduction demonstrates the device used to narrate the history.

1 .For further references to this novel, I will use *The AMJP*

The novel opens with a nameless editor (a black high school teacher) who warns us that *The AMJP* is the result of series of taped interviews.

This editorial technique implies that it is the true narrative of flesh and blood character. In addition, the "editor" pointed out that Miss Jane's friends participated in recounting her story, which eventually becomes theirs as well. The tape recorder, Gaines mentioned at the beginning of the novel, exemplifies a modern convenience utilized to capture and amplify the voice(s) of the storyteller(s). The pretence of transcribing blending and shifting of narrative voices implied by the participation of her "friends" in the storytelling underscores one of the main features of black oral tradition.

Like an African storyteller, Miss Pittman tells her story spanning from the Civil War to the Civil Rights Movements (1863-1963). *The AMJP* is structured around a series of interviews involving Miss Jane Pittman and some of her friends who help her fill in the gaps in her memory. Although the novel is divided in four sections, the different characters are all linked by the voice of the title character. The historical importance of such a division is

shown through the unchanged condition of African-Americans. Indeed, the year 1863 witnessed the Emancipation Proclamation. From then on, Blacks were supposed to be free. After the Civil War, most of the ex-slaves thought that everything was going to change. They would soon be disillusioned by the end of Reconstruction and the slave-like condition of the sharecropping system. Gaines accurately describes this short moment of freedom as "A Flicker of Light and Again Darkness" (*AMJP*, 65)

The AMJP presents the experience of the whole black community during slavery. Narrated by a black female character, the novel opens with Ticey, a young slave girl renamed Jane Brown after a Yankee soldier. Theoretically freed from bondage by the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation, the former slaves began shedding their past by giving up their slave names. Miss Jane Brown aptly revealed:

> My new name Abe Washington Don't call me Buck no more We must have been two dozens of us there, and now everybody started changing names like you change hats Nobody was keeping the same name Old Master had gived them. (*AMJP*, 17)

This un-naming and re-naming process symbolizes their new social status and their new identities that they will struggle to assume throughout the novel. This climatic and symbolic liberation of the slaves is repeated a century later during the civil rights movements. In her defiance of the white establishment, Miss Jane Pittman drinks from a "white-only" fountain, claiming her belonging to an American society wherein the blacks have been excluded for centuries. Although this pivotal event is of great importance, the novel seems to lay more emphasis on symbols than on actions. Most of the male community leaders or activists get killed, but they survived in the collective memory because their deaths unite and define the orientation of the struggle for emancipation.

The voice of Miss Pittman is a collective one through which Gaines records and captures the essence of the traditional modes of oral performance. In this regard, he relies not only on her, but also on her "friends." Thus, the holes in her memory are completed by the narratives of others because memory is always unreliable. As such, herstory actually becomes a narrative of the whole community. The heroine is directly linked to all the male characters in the novel. In fact, she is the knot around which all the spokes converge. This communal celebration wherein participate many voices helps keep the lived experience in the collective memory. Indeed, oral tradition or black culture required the participation of the group in the process of storytelling. This participatory dynamics has been articulated by Mikhaïl Baktine, who argued that "I" cannot entirely represent the self. The Other and his voice are necessary

for an efficient representation of "I" whose identity partly depends on the "Other." In Baktine's dialogical construction, narration is always a collective and participatory act.

A story of endurance, strength, self-sacrifice and heroism, the life stories of characters such as Big Laura, Joe Pittman, Ned Douglass, Jimmy Aaron and Miss Pittman herself show the nature of heroism. Bound by the oppressive system of racial superiority, the quest for freedom of the leader characters and freedom fighters evolve in a cycle of coming of consciousness of their oppression and social activism, which inevitably leads to their death. Ironically, death bestows on these freedom fighters not only a "tragic" stature but it also gives a sense to their lives and actions. As one of the main leader characters, Big Laura is a big woman full of strength. As a mother, she had two kids: Ned and a baby. She has a manly presence and can work as any man can do on the place. After the Emancipation Proclamation, the slaves are said to be "free." As a matter of fact, Master Bryant (the master of the plantation) told his slaves during a meeting that they are free. Consequently, they could stay or leave the plantation. After a hot discussion between the young and the old over the dilemma of staying or leaving, people were reluctant to take the lead of those who have chosen to leave the plantation.

As a leader, Miss Pittman stepped forward thus impart strength and power to the others. They left the plantation without any protection. Later on, the Patrollers attacked them and Big Laura fought against them with all her strength and power to protect the group. Though she killed two of their assailants, she is killed with her baby. Only the protagonist and Ned will survive this slaughter. As a community leader, Ned Douglass commits himself to educate his people. Such action involves danger in that education was forbidden to Blacks. Seen as a threat by the local white community, he is killed since he is not only trying to educate black people but he also struggles to make them vote. As for Joe Pittman whose job is to tame wild horses, he is famous and known as "Chief Breaker" for his abilities to break horses. People come all over just to see him riding horses. He believes that man comes on earth to die that is the contract he signed when he was born. Joe is killed while performing his passion. As for Miss Pittman, she lost her right to give birth as an "accident", as the result of the bad treatments she underwent during slavery. The doctors revealed her: "I was barren (…) it had happened when I was nothing but a tot. Said I had got hit or whipped in a way that had hurt me inside. Said this might be one reason I didn't grow too much either." *(AMJP, 77)*

This ill-treatment prevents her from procreating, which is seen as a cultural tragedy for a woman. She is painfully aware of her condition as the degrading effect of slavery. The abuse of female slave is recurrent in the African-American literature. The whipping scene of

Aunt Hester by Captain Anthony in the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave Written by Himself* (1845) is a striking feature of the hellish world of slavery. Captain Anthony calls for Hester at night and discovers that she has gone out with a slave named Ned, against his orders. Actually he has a particular interest in Aunt Hester since she is a beautiful lady. As a reward of her defiant attitude, she is treated as described by Douglass in the following lines:

> An own aunt of mine, whom he used to tie up to a joist, and whip upon her naked back till she was literally covered with blood. No words, no tears, no prayers, from his gory victim, seemed to move his iron heart from its bloody purpose. The louder she screamed, the harder he whipped; and where the blood ran fastest, there he whipped longest. He would whip her to make her scream, and whip her to make her hush; and not until overcome by fatigue, would he cease to swing the blood-clotted cowskin. *(Douglass*, 1997, 14-15)

The ill-treatment of female slaves by slaveholders is underscored through whipping and beating. This sequence shows that slavery has not only physical damaging effects but also psychological and biological ones as in the case of Miss Pittman. Indeed, violence against women is a key issue in Gaines' works. Many female slaves did suffer from the dehumanising effects of slavery. It had degraded a lot of bodies and souls among slaves. If being a leader means inevitable death, Gaines breaks this tragic cycle by putting the burden of social leader on the shoulders of a frail, old woman. Although the predominantly masculine, patriarchal and macho definition of heroism works to exclude women, Gaines shows how some fail to conform to their socially assigned roles. In so being, they point to the shifting features of heroism.

II. The nature of heroism

The characters who play leading roles share some similarities which distinguish them from others. One of the key features of the leader mimics the biblical motif of the messiah who saves his community from oppression and the world as a whole from evil. Longed for by the whole community, his future coming is expected through for prayers**.** The tradition of awaiting spiritual guidance as a vehicle of deliverance is shared by the black folk. Actually, through prayer, people believe they would find someone to free them from white oppression. This belief parallels the opening pages of the Book of Exodus in the Bible. The King of Egypt actually gave order to all his people to get rid of any newborn baby boy into the Nile. Whereas every baby girl should be let alive. Miss Pittman made it clear in saying that people "have always done it." (*AMJP*, 199) Black people were living in a situation of bondage with regard to their condition of slaves in America. In the middle of that despair there is only hope

for salvation and freedom through religion. Black devoted themselves to their religion, which thus represented a shelter, a refuge. Jimmy Aaron exemplifies at best this type of leader who was prayed for by the community; and God did answer the community's request in that He sent Jimmy who became thus the incarnation of his people's aspirations.

Another striking feature is the refusal of the community to follow the leader once he has emerged. When someone emerges as a leader and asks the help of his community in his struggle, some members of that community oppose his idea. The commitment of one individual to a cause is doomed to fail if the community does not follow him. As an illustration, when time comes for Jimmy Aaron or "The One" to undertake his mission, he asks the church to follow him. Unfortunately, people reject his idea, for they do not want to challenge the social system. What is at stake here is the trial of the church by Gaines. The journey motif is symptomatic of a rite of passage. As Joseph Campbell points out in *The Hero With a Thousand Face* (1949) this journey motif is not only archetypical in many cultures (American, Native American, and African) but it is also a theme of Christianity and Islam. Here the hero leaves the community to acquire insight or wisdom and then returns to bless the community with what he has gained.

The journey of our leader characters can be assessed within the context of an African American communal rite of passage. They figuratively travel from innocence to awareness and maturity. Jimmy's departure to New Orleans underlines that journey motif. As a matter of fact, he goes to New Orleans to stay with his mother. Many years later he comes back totally different from the former Jimmy. Some changes happened since he is no longer the same: his faith in God has more or less vanished, and he is now a political activist. To put it simply, Jimmy no longer believes in God and comes back home as a civil rights activist and follower of Martin Luther King, Jr. Another feature is the trope of education. The importance of literacy in Frederick Douglass's *Narrative* puts forth the history of black writing. Indeed literacy has always been linked to liberation. That is the quest for literacy is the struggle for liberty and freedom. Addressing his wife who was teaching the alphabet to young slave Frederick Douglass, the husband revealed:

> If you teach that nigger how to read there will be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy. (Douglass 1997, 29)

It is not surprising to see the death of Ned Douglass who devotes his life to teaching children how to read and write. As a matter of fact, Ned is from the start sent to school by his

foster mother Miss Jane Pittman. His departure to Kansas allows him to improve his knowledge. So that when he comes back to Louisiana, he is no longer the same Ned who left the place twenty years ago. He is now a real man aware of his duty, that of educating the black children of the quarters. All of our leader characters have an ideal for which they fight. Their commitment to their vision has the same objective: the freedom of the race. But they took different strategies to achieve that objective.

The untimely death of the characters is a recurrent feature that plagues the hero. In one way or another, leader characters are killed by the white antagonist in the course of their struggle. It is only after they die that the community correctly gets the message that they wanted to impart. This is the pattern with some variation, the different leaders in *The AMJP* satisfy. Joe Pittman appears as a leader after the period of the Reconstruction. As the embodiment of Booker Taliafero Washington, he urges Blacks to stop demanding political power and social equality and seek for economic advancement instead. Ned Douglass emerges as a leader at the end of the Spanish-American War in 1898. A war concluded by the annexation of Philippines, Puerto-Rico and Hawaii. Like Frederick Douglass, Ned stands against the exodus of Blacks. Jimmy Aaron shows up as a leader in the wake of the Civil rights Movement of the sixties. As a civil rights activist, he challenges the social system. Like Jimmy, Miss Pittman also emerges as a leader at the same period of time.

Despite various historical eras, differences in temperament, with regard to the different leaders, this is the pattern of leadership in *The AMJP*. An important feature that the leader characters have in common is that they are all male characters. As a matter of fact, Joe Pittman, Ned Douglass and Jimmy Aaron are all male type character. This enforces the ideology of the male as leader. But with the portrayal of Miss Jane Pittman as a leader, Gaines twists this assumption. Indeed, many critics denounced male hegemony with regard to women in various domains. Sexism is another evil which African American women face. Right from the start, people share the assumption that women are inherently inferior to men. This assumption influences the attitude of men toward women, so that whatever action undertaken by women is more or less overlooked. Their social activism, their struggle are purposely ignored. Bert James Loewenberd aptly states in *Black Women in the Nineteenth Century American Life* that:

> Not only do black women seldom appear in treatments of black history, but historians have been content to permit the male to represent the female in almost every significant category. Thus it is the male who is the representative abolitionist, fugitive slave, or political activist. The black male is the leader, the entrepreneur, the politician, the man of thought. When historians discuss black writers and lecturers, they are men

> (…) particularly later when black history was consciously written; it was the male, not the female, who recorded it. Women are conspicuous by their silence. (1990, 42)

This statement highlights out how far women have been removed from their "deserved" position. Thus history turns out to be exclusively a male dominated field. A priori, women have no history. But, in using a female character, Gaines signifies upon the past, a period during which women have been denied history. Through Miss Jane Pittman, Gaines symbolically gives voice to millions of women who have been historically silenced.
In *The AMJP*, the protagonist tells her story. The writer portrays her as the symbol of the whole black experience in America. She reports her personal history with the help of her "friends," thus making it a collective effort. It is a historical account of a woman from adolescence to old age, who performs deeds worth celebrating and who, despite the odds that she endures, keeps her dignity. Unable to conform to social conventions, she is also unable to conceive because of the mistreatment she endures as a slave. Her double inability to bear children and adjust to the racist laws of society shows her unique feature. Although she never becomes a mother, her nurturing, maternal love, self-sacrifice and sense of duty for the community give full meaning to her life.

III. The changing nature of leadership

As defined in *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language* leadership "is the position or function of a leader. It is an act or instance of leading, guidance and direction. A guiding or directing head as of an army, movement, or political group" *(Flexner, 1987,1093).* The concept of leadership is complex in that it involves various meanings. More often, it is used as synonymous with words such as king, chief, president, hero, genius, decision maker, etc.

In *The AMJP*, Gaines redefines the concept of leader by undermining the traditional features (male, young, revolutionary) of the black hero, which excludes women. Thus he subverts the traditional heroic slave narrative, predominantly; the stories of male escape and acts of bravery. The biblical motif of the messenger/messiah is quite striking. Actually, it underscores the impact of the Bible in the tradition of Afro-American novel. Blacks have always compared their oppressing condition to that of the Jews. Miss Pittman could aptly reveal that in "The Quarters": "People's always looking for somebody to come to lead them. Go to the Old Testament; go to the New. They did it in slavery; after the war they did; they did it in the times [….] they have always done it." *(AMJP, 199)* In this quotation, the protagonist renders not only the belief of the community (expectation from a leader to save

the people) but she also points out the origin of that belief (the Bible). In so doing, she justifies her action in expecting Jimmy Aaron to be "the one."

The male chauvinism of expecting a male leader is questioned by the portrayal of Miss Jane Pittman as a leader. Born with no sign predicting her messianic role, she survives the violence of slavery simply because she is a woman. As an eyewitness to the most tragic moments of African-American history and an elderly woman at the time of the narration, she symbolizes the muted, but enduring type of black leader whose voice transcends time and space. As a heroine, Miss Jane Pittman does not stand alone because she draws her strength from her people.

The novel opens with her bravery and obstination to be called Jane Brown (name given to her by a Yankee soldier after his daughter in Ohio) instead of Ticey (her slave name). Despite the beatings that this rebellious act involves, she remains defiant vis-à-vis her master and mistress. She invokes and reverses the traditional symbol of feminine modesty. Through her words and deeds, we see the myth shared by different generations of American "self-made women." In fact, she emerges as a type of person strongly marked by trials and tribulations of slavery. In her failure to go North, she displays a pattern of imagery of confinement. That reflects the limited space options available to a black slave. Later, she becomes a mother figure to the entire community, precisely to many young men black and white: Ned Douglass, Tee Bob Samson, Jimmy Aaron.

The idea of manhood is rampant in the narrative. All of the black men struggle to articulate their manhood. Even if the four sections of the novel deal with the lives of four men, it is under Jane's voice and authority that Ned Douglass, Joe Pittman, Tee Bob Samson, and Jimmy Aaron are presented. Joe Pittman conquers horses as a way of proving his worth. Taming horses is metaphorically taming nature. Ned Douglass, as for him, openly defies the social order by becoming a schoolteacher and imparting knowledge, which involves race relations. Tee Bob commits suicide face to his weakness in challenging a society where race defines him and everyone regardless the true content of their heart. Jimmy Aaron also is defiant by organizing political protests. All of these brave men untimely die through their commitment. If Miss Jane Pittman were a man, she probably would have met untimely death like the male character. What is at stake here is that she serves as an impetus, a provider for the necessary energy to the male character and brings them to the level of manhood. Without the contribution of women, the male character would not rise to the status of the hero.

In *The AMJP*, the dominant voice of Miss Pittman is figuratively related to the contribution of women in the fight for freedom and justice. The heroine's story is that of a

woman who remains unbroken by her experience as a female slave. The way she reaches her social status recalls the myth of the American achievement. It is an affirmation of womanhood and power, of authority and control. She seizes power in life under the weight of racism and sexism. She agrees to participate in the demonstration planned by Jimmy Aaron in Bayonne despite her hundred and ten years. Actually, she becomes an inspiration to her community. She leads now the Blacks from the plantation to Bayonne for the demonstration. The news of Jimmy's death is like an incentive element, which brings people together. In portraying a female character, Gaines implicitly questions gender. For centuries, women have been put in the margins of history. This misrepresentation is what Gaines tries to correct for future generation. Through his heroine, he assesses the socio-political contribution of black women in general. The novel opens with a strong and powerful female leader character Big Laura and ends up with a frail and aging, Miss Jane Pittman. They are the connectors through whom every male character operates and gain his strength, charisma, political and social radiance.

Conclusion

The AMJP is a historical fiction that combines the showing and the telling of history. The theoretical framework of this novel focuses on the relationship between women and the black oral tradition through the oral performance of Miss Jane Pittman. Gaines uses memory to structure the whole novel and it is consequently depicted as a vehicle of culture. As a matter of fact, in African context, women play a great role in the transmission of the values and mores of the community. It has always been a pleasure to tell one's story and to have it understood by others. The protagonist is an authentic storyteller who used vivid language to narrate her story. As a storyteller, and especially a central strong character in the novel, Gaines underlines the central role played by women in the black communities. Actually women greatly contribute to the survival of the race. Therefore, it is an appeal to African American to correct the misrepresentation of the female figure. Gaines' narrative is thus naturalistic, for everything Miss Pittman narrates derives from what she "knows" or from her personal experience. In portraying a female character, the novelist questions gender. He tries to correct the misrepresentation of women who, for many decades, have been denied history. This false stereotype of "mammy" or "nigger wench" is what Gaines tries to break in "telling the truth" for future generations. Through the heroine, he assesses the socio-political contribution of black women in general. The way the novel opens and ends (with female leader character) implies that everything starts with a woman and ends up with her. It also

underscores the "equal" place of gender with regard to the social activism in the quest for black's liberation. *The AMJP* is recognition and a celebration of women's contribution in the political struggle. It seizes the opportunity of the Civil Rights Movement to question the place of women in society. The quest for which they fight is also a quest for their own liberation. Here again, Gaines gives credit to the female character who despite the odds of oppression emerges as an enduring character. In addition, the novel calls for the unity between male and female. Their union is indeed important for the "success" of the struggle. It stresses cardinal values such as courage, endurance, self-respect, boldness and sacrifice, which transcend gender.

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