Black Resistance to White Oppression in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, by Ernest Gaines

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Abstract

From slavery to the Civil Right Movements, Blacks have always fought against the white oppressor for more freedom. This resistance is harshly led by leaders from the black community who have braved any kind of danger to establish a society with more justice. Some of these leaders have been assassinated, but they died as heroes in the service of their communities. To these leaders, we must add more organized movements such as Civil Rights Movements which attacked racial segregation to promote a more egalitarian society for the effective insertion of Blacks in American society in general. During this long struggle, some significant successes such as the abolishment of slavery, amendments granting Blacks citizenship and voting rights, the Civil Right Act banning discrimination based on race, color, religion in employment and public accommodations have been obtained. This notable progress allows Blacks to take part actively in the development of America, even if certain social claims are still on.

Key words: Resistance, oppression, leadership, civil rights movement, democracy

Résumé

Les Noirs en Amérique ont de tout temps lutté contre l'oppresseur blanc pour plus de liberté. Cette résistance est âprement menée par des leaders issus de la communauté noire qui ont bravé toutes sortes de dangers pour instaurer une société avec plus de justice. Certains de ces leaders sont morts assassinés, mais ils l'ont en tant que des héros au service de leurs communautés. A ces leaders, il faut ajouter des mouvements plus organisés tels que les Mouvements de Droits Civils qui se sont attaqué à la ségrégation raciale pour promouvoir une société égalitaire en vue d'une insertion effective des Noirs dans la société américaine en général. Au cours de cette longue lutte, certains succès notables ont été obtenus tels que l'abolition de l'esclavage, les amendements octroyant aux Noirs la citoyenneté et le droit de vote, le passage de la loi des droits civils qui interdit la discrimination basée sur la race, la couleur, la religion dans l'emploi et dans les lieux publics. Ces avancées notables permettent aux Noirs de participer activement au développement de l'Amérique, même si certaines revendications sociales se poursuivent.

Mots clés: Résistance, oppression, leadership, mouvements de droits civils, démocratie.

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Introduction

Black people in their history have fought at all levels of the American society and at each the patterns of racism and discrimination that they undertook, because many frequently died for their beliefs at the hands of white racists, but they died as heroes.

African-American writers showed that fiction could celebrate Blacks' effort to preserve their humanity and recover their lost identity. Among these writers, we have period to restore their identity. This challenge was issued by black leaders who refused to accept the long standing racial relationships. It was a dangerous business this challenge of Ernest Gaines. Novelist and short story writer, he was born in 1933 on the River Lake plantation in Louisiana where he experienced the racism of the Deep South. In his search to write about his people, he has published several novels among which we can quote: *Catherine Carmier* in 1964; *Of Love and Dust* in 1967; *Bloodline* in 1968; *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* in 1971; *In my Father's House* in 1978; *A Gathering of Old Men* in 1983; *A Lesson Before Dying* in 1997. All of Gaines' fiction is set in Louisiana, with its unique fixture of Whites and African-American cultures. The conflicts among these groups are central to his novels mainly black resistance to white oppression for more dignity.

In general, resistance is the fact of refusing to give in to an opposed force. In the case of Blacks in America, resistance is the determination to refuse and reject discriminatory legislation.

Our purpose is to show how Blacks led their fight against the numerous obstacles set by the white administration. What effective means did they use in their struggle and what were the results of this struggle?

To analyze the resistance of Blacks in America, we will see in the first part the freedom fighters, that is to say the leaders from the black community who fought against white oppression to set up a world that could accommodate a black perspective. The second part will deal with Blacks' attempt to organize civil rights movement to repudiate the white racial codes in order to get into the mainstream of American life. The third part will be devoted to the results obtained by Blacks in their fight.

A- Black Leaders and their Power

In their long struggle against the white oppressive system to recover their lost identity and to acquire a full citizenship in order to heave equal rights as Whites, Blacks at each period needed leaders to defend their interests. Since Blacks had no legal rights, the purpose of the leaders from the black community was to guide or direct a group, a movement to claim for their rights to have a legal recognition and take part in decision-making. In this fight, the black community must not only deal with problems that are of concern to all the people, it must also draw upon indigenous leadership.

a- Indigenous Leadership

Indigenous leadership is imperative because the black man must learn that he does not have to rely upon leadership that the white power structure appoints for him. When this happens, as it has in the past, whites invariably take over. Black people need their own leaders. Whether the Whites like it or not, they must begin to live with the black leaders that

the black people themselves appoint. The community has to provide a way whereby the indigenous leaders are indentified, people must have opportunity to act and do things, to participate over a period of time. Blacks must respond in their own way, on their own terms, in a manner which fits their temperaments, the definition of themselves, the roles they pursue, the goals they seek are their responsibility. Black people can achieve these goals only through organizations which generate power. This power is the historical conflict between Blacks and Whites at home and abroad.

It suggests Negro dominance and retaliation against Whites for centuries of oppression. It is the struggle of Blacks for emancipation and for full participation in American life as citizens. Thus, the black power articulates three major feelings which are pride in color, determination and a clear recognition that some form of power organization is necessary to open the country to the black race.

In *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman***,** various aspects of this leadership are shown. In the novel, Unc Isom on the plantation assumed a leadership role. He was respected and listened to. It was under his leadership that the newly freed people held a meeting, to decide whether they should leave or stay.

After their emancipation, they were helpless and needed spokesmen in the defense of their interests. In this case, they could not disagree in following a leader. Unc Isom was then a good illustration. It was under his leadership that the newly freed people held a meeting, to decide what to do. From this meeting, it was adopted that those who wanted to leave must leave, and of course those who decided to leave were the Young people. It was then the original separation between the Young people hot headed militants and the old conservation compromisers.

The conservative position was expressed by old Unc Isom who tried to persuade the Younger blacks to use caution: *˝ Hold, this is wisdom I' m speaking from, hold now˝* (p15).

Unc Isom argued that what is past cannot be helped and that to demand a redress for past grievances is futile.

He said he was talking wisdom, but Young people rejected his wisdom and moved on, Jane among them. In his role of leadership, Unc Isom tried to convince the others to remain together but he failed. His wisdom was not enough to preserve the unity of the group. Even though Unc Isom did not succeed in his attempt to prevent the group from being separated, he proved that in a case of serious matter Blacks could meet and discuss without the guidance of Whites. This deed was of deep significance because it brought out in relief the expression of black freedom. It was clear evidence that Blacks could determine themselves without taking into account the white system which has set rules according to which they should live.

Unc Isom emerged from the black community as a leader not because he was chosen by the whole community, but it was due to his previous specific qualities which were known to everybody.

In that novel, Unc Isom plays the same role as Blue Jack in *The Bluest Eye*[1]. In fact, Blue Jack is for the others a leader because of his knowledge of African tradition and folktales. He is respected and listened to by all the others. Cholly is one of those who have been influenced by Blue Jack. Cholly is still a teenager when his aunt Jimmy who takes care of him dies and at the same time he is rejected by his father. He has no other person on whom he can rely. It is Blue Jack who teaches him how to resist adversity for his integration in American social life. This is why he considers Blue Jack as a hero because it is thanks to him that he acquires a detailed knowledge necessary for his socialization.

[1] Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, New York: Winston, 1970.

The process of socialization in which a particular behavior or action has an impact on others is developed by Cooley C. H[2]. He shows that the concept of self evolves from social interaction and the individual takes into account the point of view of the leader of the society in which he lives. The leader can be defined as a person whose attitudes have an influence on the life of an individual. Those attitudes of a leader can either be positive or negative and can therefore influence the concept of self. In the case of Cholly, he has been influenced by Blue Jack.

After Unc Isom, Big Laura also became a leader. Her leadership was seen through the little band she led. When the little band left the plantation, they were like children, unused to the responsibilities of independence and intoxicated by their new sense of identity, they did not submit easily to the social imperative of making voluntary concessions.

Nobody wanted to take the lead for fear that he should mislead others. Big Laura decided to take the lead. She was known by her physical strength on the plantation, for she could work harder than any man. Despite her two children, Ned and a little girl, and her big bundle on her head, she was in the front followed by all the others. When a slow-wit tried to rape Jane, she intervened energetically between them and hit the slow-wit. From this, she warned the others to prevent them from fighting.

She did not want any more trouble within the little band and she said:

> ″You free, then you go'n act like free men.
> If you act like you did on that plantation,
> Turn around now and go on back to that plantation. ″ (P 19)

In saying so, we notice that Big Laura spoke with authority and nobody in the group dared contest her authority. She established that her new role of leader fitted her because she could preclude conflicts within the group. At a time when the need of leaders was crucial in the black community, Blacks couldn't base their solidarity on personal feelings and past disagreements; neither could they dislike anybody who was for the freedom and self-determination of Blacks in America. It was in this sense that Big Laura's role was decisive, for she demonstrated that Blacks were in a democratic society and were no longer submitted to white people, since women as well as men could be the mouthpiece of their people. She also showed that black people could get united for the same goals.

Black leaders, fighting to recover the identity for the whole race, should not only be supported by their community, but they should also be courageous.

b- Courage of leaders

Courage is the quality of mind or spirit that makes a person able to control fear in the face of danger, hardship, pain or misfortune.

Being courageous for the black leaders in the United States means that they had to fight back the white system without recoiling and without fear.

In American history, black leaders were characterized by their strong will and they were ready at any time to die as heroes for the better of their communities and for dignity and pride for the black race.

In *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* this aspect has been clearly and fully expressed. In the novel, Big Laura's leadership continued with her courage. When the little band which was a burden to her got in the swamps, they stopped to sleep for it was night. This night, Big Laura made a fire in the dark swamps with an iron and a flint, all the others around

[2] Cooley C. H., *Human Nature and the Social Order*, New York: Schoken, 1964.

her. She did know that it was dangerous to make this fire because with its flame they could be seen by the patrollers, but she did it. This assertion of their freedom in which the blaze of the fire defied the dark swamps served only to expose them and they were killed. But the massacre was not total, Jane and Ned were the only survivors.

Big Laura symbolized the original black mother whose courage and determination transfused blood-strength into her group. Her courage and her strength were not enough to save the little band.

After Big Laura, Joe Pittman in glorifying the black race emerges also as a leader. Jane met him and they got married. She moved with him from Louisiana to a place near Texas border where he took a job breaking wild stallion. Jane saw this as dangerous work and wanted him to stop this job. But Joe refused arguing that it was a gift God gave him and added also that every man signs a contract when he is born, accepting death as the basic condition of life; and if his life and his death are to have any substantial meaning, he must past his life doing the best way he can whether he can do best. When a wild stallion run away, Joe died in an attempt to recapture it.

In doing so, Joe fulfilled his potential. He died in freedom nobly. In Joe we see the emergence of black manhood, which in accepting the possibilities of death, brought freedom, self-respect and pride, which could not be achieved by following the pleas of the protective black woman.

The stallion stood as the force of nature with which man had to struggle, if he did not want to become a passive slave to himself and his fears. Joe's attitude showed that life is tied to death and the fight to defeat death makes life meaningful. Joe's struggle was similar to the fire lighted by Big Laura in the dark swamps. Both are assertions of the black presence against a world that would extinguish that presence. Both contained death because that assertion made them vulnerable, but these assertions were supremely valuable.

After Big Laura and Joe Pittman, Ned, Jane's adoptive child also became a leader through the fight that he undertook against white oppression. He joined a committee which was organized by black soldiers to see how Blacks were treated. His role consisted in helping people to leave for Kansas. It was the beginning of Ned's trouble with the white people, because they knew about the committee and began looking for people like him. This is why colonel Dye, one of the old masters of the South warned Jane to make Ned stop his job, but Ned refused, saying that he was doing what he thought was right. For this reason, he was killed.

Like Joe Pitman, Ned Douglass also died with dignity. Joe Pittman and Ned illustrated two of the forms and the pursuit it took. Both were based on personal courage.

Joe faces nature and Ned braved a social system. Joe met natural necessity in a struggle that ennobled himself and his antagonist. Ned confronted a degenerated, demeaning artificiality, a social apparatus that clothed its neurotic frats and meant weakness in piety and righteousness. Joe's struggle was universal, the model of other specific instances. Ned's struggle took its origin from the larger universal. Joe's an act performed in freedom, while Ned's an act in which freedom must be torn from an oppressive society.

The courage of both men, Joe and Ned can be compared to Sula's in *Sula*[3]. In that novel, the main character, Sula distinguishes herself by her courage facing with adversity. One day, on her way back from school, she is accosted by white boys who want to exert brutalities on her. Without fear, she takes a knife from her bag and tears her finger and asks them: "If I can do that to myself, what you suppose I'll do to you?" Seeing the blood on her finger, they run away.

[3] Toni Morrison, *Sula*, Parts: Bourgeois, 1973. p 54

This victory is not personally for Sula, but it is also for the black community. In front of the white repressive power, it is necessary to have courageous leaders from the black community to resist or to stop repression. Sula's courage like Joe's and Ned's represent not only the refusal of white domination, but also the challenge of resistance against American oppressive forces.

In addition to the support and the courage that black leaders should have, they should also be smart.

c- The Smartness of Leaders

Black leaders in America have always been distinguished by their smartness. They were well educated to communicate with people still unlettered and explained them their past.

They have allowed their people to make an undeniable progress in their fight to recover their identity. It is in this sense that they could be considered as heroes in so far as they showed their people how to behave in the face of numerous obstacles set by the white power.

In *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman,* this aspect has been illustrated. In the novel, like all the other boys on the plantation, Ned also went to school. But contrary to them, he became quickly learned, joined a committee, left for Kansas and came back to Louisiana as a teacher. It was from this moment that he decided to teach the others, for he wanted them to rise. He bought a house in which he taught and a piece of land near a river to build his school. He was determined to help the others to rise. Unfortunately, white people were in conversant with all that he was doing and considered him as a menace to society. From then on, they were planning to eliminate him. This was seen through the warnings of Albert Cluveau to Jane.

˝they talk about your boy, Jane. They don't want him build that school there, no they say he just good to stir trouble munks Niggers…˝ (P 105).

When Jane told Ned to beware of Albert Cluveau, he replied, saying that he would build his school and teach till they kill him. Ned, induced by his courage, decided to defy the white system whether they liked it or not.

Seeing that he was preparing the youth for the future battles, Whites hired Albert Cluveau to kill him.

Ernest Gaines lays a particular stress on education because for him, school remains the only way Blacks can contest white supremacy. He shows in his novel that the end of slavery brought about an incredible thirst for knowledge and information. Rarely in history have people longed for education as the freed Africans. They believed that one of the great differences between them and the whites was knowledge. The thirst for education is shown in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*. On Mister Bone's plantation, all the children were allowed to go to school. The little boys attended day school and the grown people who worked on the plantation attended school at night. They had a teacher who came from the North. Like all the other children, Ned began his education. He later went to New Orleans to continue his studies and came back to the South in order to teach others. In some instances, Africans were taught in school established on the farms where they worked. More schools were opened for the business of educating African-American populations. Some African-Americans spent years securing rudimentary education in order to serve others as teachers. Each one teaches one seems to have been the motto, as those who gained basic education rushed to teach those who had no education. In the novel many characters became teachers. In addition to Ned, there were Lilly, Joe Hardy, and Mary Agnes. Even if teaching was neither well paid nor secure, their main purpose was to help a large number of Africans to be instructed. Believing that it was possible to secure the American dream through proper education, African-Americans in the South created local organizations and supported groups to encourage especially promising students to gain more education. The Freedmen's Bureau

provided massive assistance. Relying upon the good will of the people of the United States, the bureau set up schools, found teachers and taught young and old how to read and write, for at the time of the Emancipation Proclamation, only one out of every ten Africans could read and write. Schools opened the way of success for African-Americans. They acquired knowledge and their education enabled their insertion in American society. Many rose to prominence as thinkers and sought a way to become the help of their brothers. Some became leaders and played a decisive role in the struggle that Blacks undertook against the white repressive system. School can be considered as the institution in American history which started the black emancipation struggle and the recovery of lost identity.

This aspect of Blacks teaching the others is also reached in *Beloved*[4]. In Cincinnati (Ohio), as no school wants to receive black children, Lady Jones, a black woman, gathers children at her house to teach them. They learn how to read and write. Denver, the daughter of Sethe is among these children. After one year, like several other children, she becomes bright and intelligent.

In his studies, Andrew Billingsley[5] indicates that in the first decade of the twentieth century, about 45% of black children go to school. This figure increased till 65% at the eve of the Second World War (1939-1945). After the war, when educative systems corresponded to the will of black people, about 87% of black children were registered at school. When the Supreme Court decided to suppress segregation at school in 1954, the percentage of black children registered at school was roughly equal to white children. This effort to send black children to school resulted in the increasing number of black people working in the public administration as well as in the private sector.

But when Whites in the South regained political control, civil rights violations were more intense, social tensions affected African-Americans in other regions as well. These tensions are mostly about racial segregation, disfranchisement, exploitation and violence. In defiance, African-Americans adopted a combined strategy of direct action with nonviolent resistance known as civil disobedience, giving rise to the African-American civil rights movement.

B – CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENTS

The African-American civil rights movement (1955-1968) refers to the movements in the United States aimed at outlawing racial discrimination against Blacks and restoring voting rights to them. The aims of this movement were to have racial dignity, economic and political self-sufficiency and freedom from oppression by Whites.

a- Blacks Under Racial Codes

During the Reconstruction Period (1865-1877), a number of southern States passed laws designed to protect the civil rights of Blacks. But with the end of this period, many States enacted discriminatory statutes to deny these States that help until the Sixties. Segregation blossomed with separate public accommodations.

In *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman,* this blossoming is illustrated. Robert Samson, an old slave master from the South had two sons, Tee Bob, a white and Timmy, half-black. Timmy was hated by everybody on the Samson plantation, particularity by Tom Joe. This latter wanted Timmy to call him Mister Tom Joe for he thought he was superior to him. As Timmy refused to do so, Tom Joe beat him. Robert Samson said he had nothing to do to

[4] Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, New York: Knopf, 1987.
[5] Andrew Billingsley, *Climbing Jacob's Ladder: The Enduring Legacy of African-American Families*, Englewood: Prince Hall, 1974, P.172.

Tom Joe and told Timmy to leave his place. Timmy was forced to leave not because he behaved badly or that he was a trouble-maker, but just because he was a nigger. The injustice caused to Blacks in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* can be compared to what happened to Blacks in *Beloved*. In fact, *Beloved* recalls the physical abuse inflicted to Blacks during slavery. Sethe, the main character had a similar fate as Timmy's. She was groped by the sons of her master and when she informed Mrs Garner about what her sons did, Schoolteacher made them beat her. She still bears the scars from this beating on her back. It is with a sob in her voice that she told the others what happened to her:

> After I let you, those boys came in here and took my milk...held me down and took it. I told Mrs Garner...them boys found I told on them. Schoolteacher made one open my back and when it closed it made a tree. It grows there still.[6]

From this, we notice that the white control of the South, sanctioned by the federal government meant that Africans were not legally protected from the most overt kinds of racism. Any person could beat or insult any black person with impunity.

In the field of education, Blacks were also segregated. Just after the Emancipation Proclamation (1863), the newly free Africans rushed to build schools and obtain education, which they believed would enable them to secure their lives and the future of their children. But all these efforts on behalf of education, and the spirit that inspired them, were bound to fail in time under the pressure of racial and political oppression. In the novel, this is shown, for all the teachers, from Miss Lilly to Mary Agnes got into trouble with the white administration and were forced to leave for ever. White people thought that if a great number of Blacks became fully educated, they could take part in the various struggles and inhibit them to exploit them. Whites considered black education as a danger and a threat to their situation. This is why they prevent Blacks from acquiring knowledge.

Another aspect of racial code described in the novel is related to marriages. In the South, laws prohibited interracial marriages. Then any person who tried to violate these laws precipitated his own death.

Tee Bob (a white boy), in failing in love with Mary Agnes Lefabre (a black girl), ignored that there was no miscegenation in the era in which he lived. But Mary Agnes knew that Tee Bob's origins and the culture they lived in would deny any success for Tee Bob's love. Tee Bob had the firm conviction that love has no border and he expected that his love would transcend the old rules set in the South. For the southern whites, however, the rules under which they lived could not be removed. Thus, seeing that his love for Mary Agnes could not come about, he committed suicide for he could not live under these rules. Tee Bob's death suggested the cultural resignation, for which everyone, including Jane is to blame. He paid for the sins for them all. Tee Bob in committing suicide wanted to sensitize white people about their old rules which led inevitably to death for Blacks as well as Whites and therefore, these rules should be removed. Unfortunately, his death was not an instrument of salvation, and could not solve racial differences.

Another aspect of racial code is about vision. Blacks are not seen by Whites and if they are seen, it is as animals. This aspect is developed in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*. On the plantation of Mr. Bone, the one who reads and writes letters is Jimmy. After his departure to New Orleans with his parents, a small black boy was chosen to do the same job. This small boy is hated by his master. Looking at him, he does not see a human being, but an animal when he says: "we got here that ugly boy to read and write for us. That boy was as

[6] Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, New York: Knof, 1987,PP. 16-17

ugly as a monkey" p 205. This visual distortion is also developed in *The Bluest Eye*. In that novel, a little girl called Pecola enters a shop belonging to Yacobowski, a white man. Despite her real presence in the shop, he does not see her. That scene in the shop is the following:

> Somewhere between retina and object, between vision
> and view, his eyes draw back, hesitate and hover. At some
> fixed point in time and in space, he senses that he
> needs not waste the effort of a glance. He does not see
> her, because for him there is nothing to see. [7]

In fact, he looks at Pecola, but he only sees a series of signs, a symbolic configuration. For him, Pecola is the symbol of what is ugly, dirty and degrading. He denies Pecola's presence in the world both physically and symbolically.

Like the small boy seen as a monkey and Pecola perceived as signs, the protagonist of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*[8] goes unnoticed. He is invisible because people refuse to see him. He appears in the eyes of others as a fantasy.

This refusal to see Blacks and their culture is a political problem: segregation. It is a racist attitude which consists in denying and even ignoring the presence of Blacks in America.

The segregation mode introduced in the South as custom attained legal status. Africans suffered most from the inequities of the justice. But rather than live passively, they would get united to struggle in order to maintain homes and institutions. Thus, civil rights movement became more intense.

b- Fresh upsurge of civil rights movements

The first meaningful civil rights movement came into being at the end of the nineteenth century. But this first movement was essentially passive, being strongly tempered by black fears of southern white repression and reprisal. The second, more activist movement came in the sixties and embodied strategies of direct action to confront and destroy the structures of prejudices and segregation.

In *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, we have clear illustrations of civil rights movement. Ned, the adoptive son of Miss Jane is one of the leaders of the black community. He holds a meeting to sensitize black people and encourage them not to fear the white repressive system. He explains them the real meaning and importance of "union" and "organization" within the black community. For him, black people should stand together in order to be strong, it is only when they are united that they can get power to resist to white oppression. The time was then set for black people in America to organize the black community from within for self-determination. Without that organization and power that grew from it, black man would not be able to enter the mainstream. Black people should then get united and organize efforts to deal with every facet of their own interests in face of resistance from the establishment outside and from narrow divisive forces inside. They should build up their own communities and make them desirable places to live, work, play and send their children to school. This meant encouraging people to remain in their communities and helping them improve the quality of living in them. To achieve these goals, Blacks should acquire power. They should not be afraid of the power and should see it, use it, because a community organization to operate on a base of power should be oriented to action. The problem of power as related to action, was a simple one for one had to ask what ends were to be achieved

[7] Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, New York: Winston, 1970, PP. 41-42.

[8] Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, New York, Random House, 1952

and what means were available and most effective. A strong community organization, run by the people and for the people should possess the confidence of the people. It should be a community organization whose end was to improve living conditions and not mere talk. It should also be a strong organization in which people would find their own dignity because the organization did not beg, but did negotiate with the white power as an equal. This was an organized structure based on the self-determining powers of the people and coming into confrontation with the existing powers, conflicts would grow, and controversies would multiply, but the organization was preparing for the extensive conflicts that did indeed develop. From this moment on, black people should understand that they were in a war against extinction, a struggle against genocide and suicide. Blacks were then in trouble and because of its long history of racism, America as a whole was in trouble. This is why black people in a disadvantaged community tried to assert their humanity with solidarity. At this point, they really had no alternative. Either they established community power or they would forever remain at the mercy of poor housing, inadequate education and joblessness.

In the novel, after the death of Ned, Jimmy Aaron drove home the importance of Joe's and Ned's example. He returned to his native country around Bayonne as the point man for a civil rights organization. Jimmy, having seen the importance of organization in Alabama, came to Bayonne in order to induce his people to organize, because it was through organizations that they could get power to enter the mainstream. Jimmy wanted his people to organize for their basic self-interests and to organize to keep from being exploited or helped in paternalistic ways by white society. Only then, would they be powerful enough to claim a rightful place in American life.

But Blacks on the plantation were frightened and slightly angered by Jimmy's defiant intentions. Jimmy managed to win many of them over, convincing them to march in a demonstration he would plan for execution in Bayonne. But many of them like Elder Banks and Just Thomas saw in this demonstration a real threat to their social situation. They feared that they should be evicted by their master Robert Samson.

From Robert Samson's attitude, we can say that he was one of the last of a long line of white southerners who had maintained an inflexible resistance to change and growth. Just as southern whites fought for the re-establishment of a white supremacist rule after the civil war, so did they fought for its perpetuation in the face of a growing civil rights movement. Just as colonel Dye took over the Bone plantation on which Jane worked, upon the collapse of the Reconstruction Period and ordered the Blacks either to accept the return on the old order or to get out. So did Robert Samson who tells his black workers that he would throw anyone out of the house he occupied on the Samson land if he participated in the Bayonne demonstration.

When black people organized, white people panicked and struck back, for they would not relinquish the power with which they had help the black people in his place for centuries, not without fighting every step the way. History showed that black people could not rely on the moral integrity of organized white society to give power to black people voluntary. It should be wrested from that society. The price of acquiring was conflict and confrontation.

Confrontation was then inevitable. In the novel, like Martin Luther did in Alabama, Jimmy also tried to plan a demonstration in Bayonne with his followers. They chose a little girl to make their Rosa Parks. Rosa Parks was a great figure in African-American history, her importance stood in the fact she violated the racial codes by taking a seat in the front of a bus, seats reserved to whites only. She was considered as an African-American civil rights activist whom the U.S. Congress later called "the first lady of civil rights", and "the mother of the freedom movements".[9] Park's act of defiance became an important symbol of the modern

[9] Suzanne Jones, *Race Mixing: Southern Fiction since the Sixties*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins, 2004

Civil Rights Movements and she became an international icon of resistance to racial segregation.

When she was arrested, the black community of Montgomery boycotted the bus system of the city until buses and some business in the community were desegregated. Like Rosa Parks, the little girl also violated the white racial codes by attempting to go and drink from the whites' only water fountain. When, she was arrested, the black community of Bayonne organized a march to protest. The day of the demonstration, Jimmy was killed by the white racists.

The gathering of Blacks who started for Bayonne was the turnings point of their fight. In agreeing to participate, Jane showed the profound change she has undergone. When the news of Jimmy's death arrived, the gathered blacks went through several minutes of uncertainty. Alex Strut, one of the demonstrators stepped forward, declared his intention of going into Bayonne to meet Jimmy's spirit. Jane decided to go with him. In making this decision, Jane healed the old split between the old man and the young, and brought the leading males and the following females into harmony. She had like the classical black mother, sought to teach her men the protective coatings of obedience and submission. More than that, she has born one of the essential principles of life, continuity and survival. She joined her longevity with the intensity of Alex. Probably Alex would die, as had Joe, Ned, and Jimmy. It would be in the service of the black race's life principle. Jimmy's death instead of being considered as an end was however the beginning of a new impulsion in the black history, for there were more Joes, Neds, and Jimmys.

The protestation organized by Jimmy can be compared to the one of Shadrack in *Sula*.[10] Shadrack is a character who participated in the World War I. When he returned to "Medallion" after the war, he noticed that Blacks are still oppressed by Whites. To help them improve their living conditions, he instituted the National Suicide Day to protest against the white administration. This National Suicide Day takes place each year on January, 03rd. He succeeds in convincing the black community of "Medallion" to join him in his protestation. During that demonstration, several people die when the tunnel collapses. Like the death of Jimmy, the one of "Medallion's" people is perceived by others not as an end, but rather as the beginning of a new life. After this collective death, the tunnel was renovated. This renovation is seen as the symbol of change and hope.

Seeing the social and political changes that were emerging in America, Tocqueville believed that a "new political science"[11] would be needed. According to him, it would be democracy. He observed that over the previous decades, social, economic and political conditions of men were becoming more equal. He thought that the aristocracy was gradually disappearing as the modern world would experience the beneficial effects of equality. Taking into account that concept of democracy, Blacks decided to fight to obtain their full citizenship in order to be integrated in American social life once for all.

c- Democracy

When on January, 1st, 1963, President Abraham Lincoln proclaimed the emancipation of all slaves in those regions still under confederate control in the civil war; the slaves celebrated because they thought something new was going to happen. Optimism appeared in the black community, as Blacks gained some advantages. Politics stood as an important issue. African-Americans were granted political rights, allowed to take part in political meetings and to vote. Politics is emphasized in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*. On Mister Bone's plantation, Blacks had the opportunity to attend political meetings held by the Federal

[10] Toni Morrison, *Sula*, Part: Bourgeois, 1973.

[11] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, New York : The Library of America, 2004.

Government. Speakers praised the Republican Party. The end of slavery was the fact of the Republicans and they wanted Blacks to vote for them. The Democratic Party was for slavery and they wanted Yankees to leave the South so that they could do things by themselves. The republicans wanted to maintain the Yankee troops in order to preserve the total liberty of black people and promised them forty acres and a mule. Mister Bone was an important figure in the Republican Party and he had soldiers guard his place. Black people felt in security since they had soldiers and politicians on their side. They got the right to vote and went to the polls to vote in elections with tremendous excitement. Having been denied the freedom to vote in democratic elections, in a nation that was based upon the idea of democracy, former slaves saw elections as a great gift.

With this act of voting, black people asserted their American citizenship and fulfilment of civic duty. Thus, they demonstrated their civic identity in a country which had long considered them foreign.

Having been declared citizens and granted equal rights, it was necessary for Blacks in their quest to define their own values according to which they would live by rejecting everything negative set by white people to maintain them in a state of inferiority. They wanted to emerge at all levels of American society mainly, politically, socially, and culturally. This is why in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* Ned in his speech, insisted on the importance of equality and freedom in a democratic country. He reminded his people that equality and freedom were two things that would never be handed to them on a silver platter. These things would not come as an act of charity or as an act of good will. They should have the strength to take them and by the very act of tacking them, they would achieve personal dignity, self respect and pride in color. For this reason, he asked his people this:' 'wouldn't you rather die saying I'm a man to die saying I'm a contented slave…?'' (P. 111).

Ned was talking here about dignity, for when powerless people begin to demand power and self-determination; they generate within themselves a real sense of dignity that demands respect.

The word dignity was very important to black people in America. It should be defined in term of free will and self-determination, for a Black in America who did not have free will lost respect for himself and had no dignity.

This was the reason why Ned did not want his people to remain only in one corner, but to fight at all corners of the society. After having induced his children to fight every facet of the society, one of them asked him why he taught them to listen to Booker T. Washington, since this latter had advised his people not to seek their rights aggressively on the political and civil fronts and to nullify their quest only for social equality. To his question, Ned replied that he agreed with Booker T. Washington on that very point, but it was not enough since political power was the first step to independence and freedom. Freedom, then meant that black people should turn their backs on even the most benevolent paternalism and make their own way. Only then, would they be a self-determining people. To accomplish this, black people should participate in the decision-making process as it related to them.

The long struggle led by Blacks against the white repressive system has resulted in considerable advances in so far as they have overcome various obstacles in order to play some key roles in American society.

C- Blacks in Active Life

The importance of Blacks in active life stands in the fact that they take part in American development by carrying out occupations which contribute to American growth. Among occupations which permit Blacks to emerge as some key players, we have religion.

a- The Role of the Church

Religion played an important role in the social organization of Blacks, who were both subordinated to and isolated from white American society. In this context, the Negro church that emerged by many slaves was an institution that helped Blacks cope with and defend themselves against slavery and the subsequent racism and segregation. During Reconstruction, Blacks seized control of their own churches, the first social institutions fully controlled them in America. Its multiple functions testified to its centrality in the black community. Places of worship, churches also housed schools, social events and political gatherings. As a community center, the church and its preachers offered solace from loneliness. This solace continued through direct communication with God. Some became converted and found salvation when God spoke to them and told them they were free of sins.

This aspect of religion is shown in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman.* Among the many conversion experiences alluded to, Jane's conversion to Christianity was the most striking one. In her dream, she had a load sack of bricks and met the Lord who told her that she had to cross the river with this sack. When she set foot on the other side of the river, the Lord was standing there and told her that she was born again, meaning that she was free of sins. That night she told her story to the others, the church felt great joy and sang: "Tone the bell, Done got over, Tone the bell…" (P.138)

These songs expressed awe and wonder in regard to life and death, emotional reactions to the complexity of existence, and desire to escape even death, from the uncertainties and frustrations of their social life outside the church. Thus the church offered status and meaningful existence, as well as a refuge in a hostile world. The church thrived despite its acceptance of white domination and disparagement of Blacks. Until the sixties, this was often the role played by the Negro church. But early in the sixties, when Blacks realized that the structures of segregation were not going to go away without struggle, the church changed. In Franklin Frazier's view, the Negro church vanished and gave way to the black church which became not only the most effective agency of social life, but also the most important arena for political life[12]. It was impossible to separate religion and politics since black preachers were in front of all political fights. The black church was then the vanguard of political activism.

In *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman,* political activism is illustrated. Jimmy, one of the characters was brought up in a religious atmosphere. He read the Bible to others and preached at the church. Later, he left for New Orleans to be educated. There, he met Martin Luther King, took side with him and appreciated his ways of fighting against the Whites. When he came back, he departed from the church and indulged in politics. During a meeting, he delivered a speech in which he preached the policies of Martin Luther King in Alabama and at the same time he induced black people on Samson plantation to get united to demonstrate in order to improve their living conditions.

From this action performed by Jimmy, we notice that the power of the church lay in the fact there was no disjunction between the church and the black community. The black church won a larger battle in the sense that it destroyed the appalling, enervating psychology that

[12] Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America and the Black Church since Frazier*, New York: Schoken Books, 1974, PP. 105-106.

convinced generations of Blacks of invincibility of the Whites and the incapacity of black people to follow black leaders or to hang together under the stress of White disapproval.
In addition to the black preachers who played an undeniable role in the process of liberations of Blacks, we have also those who succeeded socially and economically, emphasizing thus the positive results of black resistance to white oppression.

b- Social and Economic Success of Blacks

Even if there is still a long way to go, Blacks in America have yet succeeded in having good positions both socially and economically. This performance of Blacks is depicted in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman.*
Ernest Gaines through his characters Elder Banks and Just Thomas shows us that Blacks can also be as successful as Whites. The financial and social standing of these two characters are due to their fight they undertook against their master Mr. Robert Samson who wanted to maintain them in a permanent system of dependence. For him, Blacks should always work for Whites. Their struggle enabled them to obtain their own plot to grow and soon they got vast farms and good harvests. Despite the domination of Robert Samson, they were wealthy and cut a figure. Their wealth echoed the period of the tycoons. In American economic history, the second half of the 19h century was described as the epoch of the tycoons. The tycoons were businessmen who amassed vast fortunes. They were fierce competitors, single-minded in their pursuit of financial success and power.

Conclusion

Finally, we notice that Ernest Gaines is one of the best known contemporary writers. His importance stands in his ability to capture the experiences of the common black people of the rural south. Through dialect, setting and characterization, he has brought to life both a region and a group of people that had been previously ignored. He accomplishes this by showing the impact of events of those one hundred years on individual blacks, who under the weight of those events had always sought ways to find again their identity. In order to repudiate racial differences and to get into the mainstream of American life, Blacks organized civil rights movements. These movements were based on the conviction of Blacks that American society was pervaded by a racist mentality, a conviction that was derived directly from the observations and everyday experiences of Blacks all over the land. These movements were also based on the belief that the consciousness of the white power structure needed to be sensitized to the plight of Blacks, that White generally needed to be enlightened about the prejudice, discrimination and overt cruelty Blacks continue to endure. The movements became more intense in the sixties when demonstrators adopted techniques of boycotts, protests, marches and sit-ins in order to bring pressure on local power and economic structures to grant justice and equality to all citizens. Having clearly been defined as Americans, Blacks came consider themselves as fully admitted in American society and contributed to its development.

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