Manhood as An Allegory in Ernest J Gaines’ A Gathering of Old Men

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Abstract
African American literature is embodied with the problem of racism. Every page of this literature carries evidences of racial discrimination and its repercussions. The white Americans have dominated the blacks, extracting labor on the threat of lynching. Almost all black writers have addressed this marginalization in their works. Gaines demarcates his stand constructing his plot around the black men who long to prove their manhood subverting the stereotype treatment of the whites. This paper is to study how a group of remarkable old black men stand together against the oppressive white society as individuals. They dust off their past life of passivity; change the habits of a lifetime and stand up for themselves when a time comes to acknowledge their dignity. Age is no more a barrier for them to assert their manhood. The black men, who are around seventies, expand their impulse for liberty from old fears and bitter experiences; influence each other to an action that will make everyone of them free beyond their perceptibility.

Keywords: Racism, manhood, dignity, marginalization, black men, oppressive, optimism
1. INTRODUCTION

“Like most of these white folks you’ll find round here, when they trying to convince you they’ll look you dead in the eye, daring you to think otherwise from what they want you to think”(7).

Gaines portrays the domination of the Whites powerfully in these lines that intensely reveal the subjugation of the Black community. The Blacks are not allowed to think for themselves and are forced to accept the thoughts of the White folk. The inhibition of Gaines throughout his early years is the muse for finding a voice for the voiceless against the voiced. The novel “A Gathering of Old Men” is a superior narrative of the highest order in establishing the manhood of the Black Louisiana community. Gaines allegorizes the oppression faced by the black people and empowers the Blacks in narrating the ordeal and abuse faced by them all through their lives. The novel is an allegory of sorts that brings in the older men folk together and describes the activities of an eventful day. An incident in the day transports the older black men to the olden times and the nostalgia transforms their attitude. They are encouraged by their self-introspection and as an act of “defense mechanism” they rise up in rebellion against the atrocities enforced on them.

2. FOLKLORE

Ernest J Gaines voices the silenced, exploited and humiliated black community in his writings. He has a very different perspective as opposed to the other writers. As a member of the Louisiana Black community, he implores the folklore, the genre synonymous with his community. His most exalted and fifth novel, ‘A Gathering of Old Men’ pays rich tribute to the loaded stories the author had accrued through conversations with the older folk of his community. The racial antagonism, marginalization, deprivation of rights is articulated vividly in ‘A Gathering of Old Men’. The revival of manhood in the septuagenarians in destabilizing the subjugation of the black community is effectively portrayed through the characters of the novel.

3. GERIATRIC BACK COMMUNITY

Martin Luther King’s campaign for equalizing the economy of the poor is taken as an allegory by Gaines to show the gathering of the geriatric black community. ‘A Gathering of the Old Men’ symbolizes a revolution, a need for change. Gaines accentuates the gathering of the old men in his novel. Old men are always considered either insignificant or eschewed by many authors as non-existent members of the society. But the author employs the unique qualities of the older generation in bringing in an upheaval in the lives of the Black community. The congregation does not watch a phantasmagoria, but ascends their long awaited opportunity to exhibit their real power that was dormant in them all these years. The novel recounts a day in Louisiana where a white man is murdered by a black and eighteen old black men assemble and own up the crime. The old men anticipate retaliation from the dead man’s family, who may demand
vigilante justice against the black community. They gather their weapons as a mark of protest but eventually the day authorizes and emboldens the old men in ushering in a new change.

The long held notion of elderly people as powerless, disabled and inactive is disproved by Gaines through the characters in ‘A Gathering of Old Men’. The older characters in the novel revel in challenging stereotypes, seeing older age as an opportunity to undertake a new venture. The equally willed men congregate to take risk and acknowledge their need for dignity. Gaines postulates the determinism of the old men to redeem themselves before they die. Growing old is perceived inevitably as becoming frail and disabled by almost every community in the world. However, Gaines’ old men volunteer ‘themselves’ to transform their community at the fag end of their lives. They affirm extropianism: a positive and empowering rational attitude towards individual and collective possibilities. As Dr. Butler, a gerontologist puts it “Human beings need freedom to live with change, to invent and reinvent themselves a number of times through their lives”.

Gaines men battle for their freedom to dignity. The alliance of old men fuses the black consciousness with black solidarity. When Candy finds Beau lying dead in front of Mathu’s house, she quickly plans to protect her caretaker from the accusation. She masterminds and gathers the old men and asks them to carry their shot guns. She asks them to bring their shot guns with empty shells, as she feels that the old men will be of no use if they face any retaliation. Possessing one’s own weapon symbolizes power. Contrary to Candy’s expectation, in a short span of time, the old men gather quickly, considering the opportunity to be the last one to demonstrate their individuality against the domineering whites as Mat indicates “This can be my last chance”.

Indefinite and unsure of their end they make ‘The gathering’ to transform their old self into a ‘new self’. To acclaim manhood, these old men have an indomitable will to overpower the Whites. The revolutionary spirit in these men is kindled through years of annoyed victim hood. The segregation of the Blacks is united by Gaines’ men and they become ready to protest and win power. Many define manhood as a physical strength nonetheless it proves nothing to the Black men. Their manhood is crippled by the manacles of racism, segregation and chains of class discrimination. The African American men necessitate an identity of their own. Evidences in literature show African American men have espoused values and are socialized towards traditional gender roles in the patriarchal White society. The blacks are considered intellectually lesser than their White counterparts.

4. MANHOOD

Manhood to African American is a blocked opportunity where they are deprived of the duties that would provide them power. Manhood is thought of as an innate quality but it is an identity to be created through social engagements. The marginalized African American’s definition of manhood differs from the white men. Mat, Chimley and the
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A group of old men in Gaines ‘A Gathering of Old Men’ revolt against the stereotype definition of Black manhood. After a lifelong continuous submission to the state of disequilibrium they stand up for themselves. Mat and Chimley’s words, “not to crawl under the bed”, prove their regenerated human nature. They are ready to face up any repercussions rather than be a coward. The previously deformed masculine power regenerates in the gathering.

A Black man is an exile or an alien in his own land. The Cajuns have taken the good land from the Blacks, unmindful of the labor they rendered to them. This angers Charlie and it becomes the motive for Charlie murdering Beau. As Jack Goldstone considers “The primary cause for revolution is the widespread frustration with socio-political situation”. Gaines men don’t deter when Mapes enquire them one by one. “….The very same land we worked, our people had worked, and our people's people had worked since the time of slavery. Now Mr. Beau had it all. Or, should I say, he had it all up to about twelve o'clock that day” (67). This infuriates Charlie more. The non-acceptance of Charlie by Bouton irks him and his deep hatred of the Bouton’s for years together culminates in the murder.

Mathu, significant among the black men, is the only one who has not fallen prey to traps and has flourished in the same environment that has curtailed the lives of his men and his community. Gaines portrays Mathu as a dignified man throughout the novel. He stands up for what is right and is always termed as the “trouble maker”. “…Mapes was a lot of things. He was big, mean, and brutal. But Mapes respected a man. Mathu was a man, and Mapes respected Mathu. But he didn't think much of the rest of us, and he didn't respect us” (84). Gaines portrays Mathu, the octogenarian as the person who stands up against the whites in all circumstances. He always strives to retain the dignity of his community. This characteristic of Mathu is evident throughout the novel and is reinstated through the memories of Chimley when he recollects Mathu refusing to return an empty bottle of cola to the store and the ensuing fight with Fix. Although Mathu fights with the Whites, they respect him as he has always stood for the retention of their dignity and offer his resistance against the Whites whenever their community is ill-treated. Both communities consider him as the real man.

As the only man to voice out against injustice and the person to offer resistance, the entire community feels that he is the one capable of a murder. Mapes, the Sherriff assumes Mathu as the murderer as he too feels that he is the only ‘man’ in the entire community who has the courage to do it. According to Mapes the black community is a long dead community who do not have real life in them to conspire or rise in revolt. The entire society is considered as ‘cowards’ by Mapes. The prejudice of Mapes is evident in the investigation of Beau’s murderer.

Many critics of the work have criticized Gaines for the portrayal of Mathu as a proud man. The author enables Mathu to enjoy the dignity of his race that is not obvious in the others of his tribe. Mathu expects his men to hold their dignity intact in each situation
but is always disappointed. He remains solitary in wading through the suppression and oppression of his society thereby earning his rightful respect and dignity. He even breaks free from Candy’s accompaniment as he does not wish to sacrifice or submit to the whims and fancies of anyone in either of the communities. This ascertained independence is viewed as arrogance and pride by his critics.

His character is further fortified when he accepts the crime that he has not committed. The acceptance heightens his stature as a ‘man’. He further infuses this manhood in Charlie while forcing a gun in his hand and asking him to commit the murder. He wants his entire community to prove their ‘manhood’ and not be mere spectators of the subjugation. Marcus Garvey acknowledges Mathu’s masculinity as a needed characteristic to complete the independence he sought from the white society. He further establishes the ‘black manhood’ when the gun bearing assemblage of the elderly people seeks an internal change in them. The change is not for mere social agitation but also for total emancipation of the Blacks.

For generations, black men have been enduring verbal scorn, physical brutality, inhuman atrocity and ruthless treatment from the whites. They never voiced out their resistance against the whites. The white supremacy had infused fear in them making them subjugate themselves with no honour or dignity even though they labored very hard. Gaines captures the agonized life of the Blacks who were denied the basic rights as ‘men’. The law was deprived to the Blacks and they were helpless even during danger to their lives. They were seen as creatures and not as human beings in most of the incidents.

5. TRANSCENDENCE OF THE GATHERING

Their younger generation was trained to accept the stereotyped racial relationship and they accept the suppression without questioning it. “They curb the empowerment of the Blacks considering themselves as superior and as rulers”. In this novel, Gaines shatters all these stereotyped prejudices and presumptions. ‘A Gathering of Old Men’ is a prominent work that transcends the intactness of the Blacks into action. This inclination wins them their dignity of their community and there is gathering of not only the ‘Old Men’ but a gathering of their thoughts too. Gaines mirrors the change that has occurred in ‘each’ member of the community. Their dormant desire to break free from the clutches of the whites, springs out at the right opportunity. The hatred of the whites that stayed accumulated in their minds manifests itself in the gathering as they oppose the white supremacy.

Black abolitionists have asserted “acceptance of servitude signified weakness, while redemptive violence, grounded in courage, intelligence and self-reliance demonstrated an authentic black masculinity”. The reversal of stereotypes already existed in some members of the community as is envisioned in the character of Candy. She sees herself always as a protector of the community, as she personally feels that the men are incapable of guarding themselves. She shows this power even to the White officer
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Mapes. This is clear in the way she asks the men to carry empty shot guns. The metamorphosis in the minds of the old men is a reversal of the stereotypes that is a revelation to characters like Candy and also an indication of revival to the reader as well.

Their physical gathering heralds the regeneration. As a ‘blessing in disguise’ the murder sets the platform for the blacks to free themselves from their inner oppression and self delineation. The emotions which are smaller in nature are given significance by Gaines to regenerate manhood. Their visit to the cemetery and the recollection of the memory instills strength in them that was unheard of and they join and act further in unison. They are made to realize their loss of identity. The invasion of machinery further delineates them from their own land. The land in which their ancestors had done hard work, day in and day out is no more. This emotion, sentiment adds on to the fury of the Blacks against the Whites. Gaines sheds light on the men purging themselves of the mask of low self-esteem and reviving as real men. He imbibes Erik Erikson’s seventh stage of theory of psychosocial development: “…adults strive to create or nurture things that will outlast them; often contributing to positive changes that benefit other people”. They contribute to society benefitting future generations. Gaines has interwoven the stories of the unheard or unspoken sufferings of the gathering of the family members. The narration bolsters them and they empower themselves physically and emotionally trying to give in their one last shot at showing defiance. The blows and threats by Mapes don’t dissolve them and they don’t give in to the demands of Mapes. They look into the eyes of Mapes challenging authority and overcoming their submissiveness.

6. SYMBOLISM

The African Americans refuse to look the whites in their eyes – a symbol betraying their fear and their unwitting submission to power when Mapes starts questioning them, they don’t look down but stare him in the eyes renouncing fear, guilt and remorse. The old men also make their mark by looking at Mapes directly into his eyes. This despises him and he starts beating them, but the resolve of the men become stronger and deeper. The characters like Billy Washington, who were ridiculed and bullied by his own community stands with the ‘gathering’ and he is the first one who comes out with a reason for the murder. ‘Looking into the eyes’ is presented vividly by Gaines through Gable, Rooster, Chimley, and Mat who muster up courage to look in the eyes of Mapes and challenge his authority. The characters who were earlier laughed at by their own community, mindless of being teased; unite together as one in opposing the white officer, Mapes. The cuckolded Rooster, the coward Chimley, the harried Mat all are encouraged when they are asked to gather with their guns, they don’t wince when Mapes continuously beats them one by one to find out the murderer.

“…then pow. Gable’s face jerked to the side, but came right back. His eyes watered, but he stared at Mapes right in the face” “…… you can do it all day long,” Gable said to Mapes. Mapes slapped
him again. Gable’s face jerked to the side just a little. His eyes blinked for a moment; then he was looking Mapes in the face again” (69).

Gable staring at Mapes signifies the empowered gathering and they don’t want Mapes to see their weakness. The uprising is initiated by Mat who carries a twelve-gauge shotgun to Mathu’s house. He refuses to listen to his wife’s command. “All these years we been living together, woman, ………you still don’t know what’s the matter with me?” (37-38) Chimley too faces a similar opposition from his wife while shooting out of the window with his shot gun “ If I come back from Marshall and fishes ain’t done and ready for me to eat, I’m go’n do me some more shooting around this house” (33). The opposition by the women folk of the community proves that they have lost their trust in the manhood of their community. They are awe-struck by the turn of events and the redemption of masculinity.

“…he stared at Clatoo long and hard. He thought if he stared long enough, Clatoo was bound to look down. But Clatoo didn't look down. He sat there with that shotgun over his legs, looking straight back at Mapes” (86).

This is further ascertained by Clatoo who takes up the leadership in organizing the gathering. He transports the black men to Mathu’s house. He even asks all the men to shoot their shot guns and keep it empty. This act of his ensures his revival of manhood. Though he may not be assertive like Mathu, still he rises up to the occasion and leads the entire congregation of the Black men against the Whites. ”So she made you the leader?” (103), Mapes asks Clatoo. He even analyses the situation keenly and averts a foolish shoot out with Mapes. He speaks to the men rationally and disperses them peacefully. But, when situation demands, he leads and encourages the troop of old men to fight and he also ensures that no one loses his life. “Clatoo didn't even look at him. And there ain't nothing a white man hate more than for a nigger not to look at him when he speak to him” (97).

Towards the end of the novel, Charlie shies away from owning up the act. Charlie is also depicted as a man of character by Gaines. He appears suddenly and confesses his crime. Though he is the murderer, he is not being suspected by the people. The provocative behavior of Beau in the fields led to the murder as a result of prolonged humiliation for so many years. Though suppressed and oppressed all through these years he has never opposed or stood up against the whites. But, he defends himself when his life is threatened by Beau. After committing the murder, he develops cold feet and flees the scene, transferring the entire blame onto Mathu. Gaines asserts his manhood through his return and confession of the crime. He also participates in the shoot-out with Luke Will’s men and dies as a warrior. He earns the name ‘Mr. Biggs’ due to his self – erasure of his own undoing.
“I am a man, sheriff,” Charlie said. “I want the world to know I’m a man. I’m a man, Miss Candy. I’m a man, Mr. Lou. I want you to write in your paper I’m a man. I want the world to know it. ……A nigger boy run and run and run. But a man come back. I’m a man” (187).

Mapes calls him Mr. Biggs and this reference is intentionally used by the author as an emphasis on the character just as Richard Wright’s ‘Bigger Thomas’ in his “Native sons”. Gaines makes this reference to ascertain the identity of the African American society.

Gaines parallels the non-violent success of Martin Luther King Jr’s philosophy. The novel depicts the ‘voices’ and ‘eyes’ as stronger than guns. There is a reversal of the historic mutilation of Black self when Gaines men are ready to reminiscent their past. The people did not look at him as he moved toward them. They didn't seem afraid; they just didn't think he was important enough to look at. The members of the black community like Tucker, Coot, Johnny Paul and other members talk for the first time as usually they don’t talk with the whites. They enforce their manhood and push Mapes to listen to them leaving him no option.

Each one influences the other with their own narrative of the incident and the collective communal voice, self-erases the emasculation and redeems their masculinity. They vent out their ire and they persuade each other to rise up with the story of the other. Gaines speaks about two gatherings. One is of the Blacks reconstructing manhood and redefining themselves. The other is the transformation that happens in the white community while they gather together in Fix’s house. For the first time, coming together of the both communities visualize a greater shift that was unforeseen by their own community to take revenge, a rarer gesture from the oppressor.

7. NARRATOLOGY

The element of hamartia - the fault of the Black people in being too submissive for a longer time is evident in all works of Gaines. This fault is a sin as the internal fear or lack of self-esteem does not allow the Black community to claim what is rightfully theirs. The realization of this happens only when Candy asks them to gather with their shotguns with empty shells. After long years of suppression, the older Black men see this as an opportunity as realization dawns on them (anagnorisis) that they have been mute to the suppression. They realize that this maybe the ‘last chance’ to prove their identity and their manhood. This self realization leads to the peripetia (or) the reversal of events. The once subjugated, oppressed Blacks have the upper hand after the murder of Beau.

8. CONCLUSION

The murder would have further suppressed and humiliated them. Instead, the Blacks gain their status as men and the Whites realize that they need to let go of a very
embarrassing colonial mindset. This reversal of the mindsets is core to the novel and Gaines portrays the change subtly and efficiently. He empowers the Black community without embarrassing the white population. Gaines has been criticized for the soft portrayal of the Whites by his critics. But the characters, the change, the situation is cleverly crafted by Gaines to promote non-violence or peace. He walks in the footprints of Luther King and enables a change without disturbing too much of the harmony that he envisioned all through his years as a black young boy. He portrays his anger, his helplessness through subtle elements as he is a harbinger of peace. He feels that the harmony the Blacks did not enjoy for a longer periods of time should not be lost in fighting for their rights. He empowers, regenerates and revives his community through communal gathering and oneness of spirit.

“Let’s get moving. Heads up and backs straight. We going in like soldiers, not like tramps” (49). These words of Clatoo summarize the self-liberation and purgation of the old men. Their gathering resurges their lost youth, lost identity and lost manhood. They straighten up and gear up for the shootout like real men. The resurgence of manhood is a revelation to the men folk of the Black community and Gaines evinces positive changes in the readers. According to Camelia Pagelia, “Manhood coerced into sensitivity is no manhood at all”. The black men are coerced out of their sensitivity and also forgo their sense of identity and oneness. The demarginalization is sensitized by the author and the reader can relate themselves to the plight of the African American people.

References
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