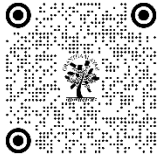


DEPICTION OF VIRULENT IN RACISM AND AN UNDEFINED FUTURE OF AFRICANS IN ERNEST J. GAINES'S *CATHERINE CARMIER*

S. A. Thire Karan Rajan ¹, Dr. J. Jayakumar ²✉

¹ Ph. D Research scholar (F/T), Government Arts College (Autonomous), (Affiliated to Periyar University) Salem Tamilnadu-636007

² Assistant Professor, Government Arts College (Autonomous), (Affiliated to Periyar University) Salem Tamilnadu-636007



Corresponding Author

Dr. J. Jayakumar, drjkvang@gmail.com

DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i6.2024.4240](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i6.2024.4240)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Copyright: © 2024 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



ABSTRACT

Being a one of the most illustrious African American novelists Ernest J. Gaines has written numerous novels to his contribution. He meticulously focused the sufferings of Africans by the white domination. The prime objectives of his novels are Racism, Gender issue, Socio-Economic status of Africans, Alienation and Isolation. In the series of Chinua Achebe, Ngugi Wa' Thiong'O and Flora Nwapa Ernest J. Gaines also been considered as one among the most resourceful and inspirational novelist. Gaines was born on a Louisiana plantation in 1933 in the midst of the Great Depression. He began working the fields when he was nine, digging potatoes for fifty cents a day. He spent most of his childhood with his aunt, Augustan Jefferson, a determined woman who had no legs but managed to take care of her family. Gaines considered her the most courageous person he ever knew. At age fifteen, Gaines moved to Vallejo, California, joining his parents who had moved there during World War II. In Vallejo, Gaines discovered the public library. Since he could not find many books written about the experience of African Americans, he decided to write his own. In 1964 Gaines has published his first novel, *Catherine Carmier* and after he published the novel *Of Love and Dust* three years, followed by a short story collection entitled *Bloodline* (1968) and another entitled *A Long Day in November* (1971). He received little attention for these efforts, but felt happy about his progress as a writer. In 1971 Gaines completed one of his most famous novels, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*. The novel follows the life of a fictional woman, Jane Pittman, who is born a slave and lives to see the Black Power movement of the 1960s. After the critical and financial success of *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, Gaines published several more novels on the topic closest to his own heart: the black communities of Louisiana. The most successful of these was *A Lesson Before Dying*, which was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize and, in 1993, won the National Book Critics Circle Award.

Catherine Carmier, however, is much more than a love story, as its critics have recognized. Their descriptions focus on relationships within the families of the plantation quarters; caste conflicts, past and present, within the Louisiana black community facing changes in old social and racial codes; the psychology of racial prejudice and racial identity; and the struggle for human relationships in this context. The novel expands on all these issues. Taken as a whole, however, it is a story of the struggle for human maturation through choices-choices young people must make when early loves conflict with new loves, when commitments to family, race, culture, and religion collide with the need to move independently beyond the limits of those communities. As in the short stories, individual movement away from the quarters community is expected and reluctantly supported for young men; commitment to home folks and values is expected, and virtually required, of young women. The novel takes the boys of the stories into young adulthood, when manhood is still to be defined. It enlarges on "Mary Louise" by reintroducing the choices facing young women. It is a story of the question of whether, in their circumstances, young people can choose at all-freely choose any love at all.

Keywords: Adulthood, Folks and Values, Family, Race, Culture and Religion

1. INTRODUCTION

The most important concentration of the novel is the critical situation of African novelist and their affected people itself. The dilemmas that faced blacks in the 1960s, specifically in southern Louisiana, where all choices were still conditioned by inter and intra-racial codes and conflicts and by the long history in which these had already been played out. In that context young men and women faced different demands, options, and limitations. What constitutes freedom,

promise, and progress for Jackson and Catherine, and, by extension, for other young black males and females-what can and will they choose? That is the broad question of the novel.

Subsequently broad a question seemed to justify, indeed necessitate, a novel with dual protagonists, male and female, and techniques to make them individuals as well as representatives of the situation. Commenting on the balance of interest between Jackson and Catherine, Gaines said, "I don't see it as Catherine's story more than Jackson's" (15). Despite the final title chosen in last-minute frustration, according to the author, the novel attempts this balancing act. It seems to focus first on Jackson's dilemma: stay in the stultifying atmosphere of the plantation to teach, as his aunt desires and believes she has a right to demand, or drift back to California's less virulent racism for an undefined future. The story then shifts emphasis to Catherine's equally severe choice: stay as moral support to her possessive father and emotionally abused mother or leave them for the dubious freedom and future offered by Jackson's love. Neither young person seems meant to be subordinate in the other's story. The two are joined in a fierce dilemma, made poignant by the kind and number of obstacles to their union. Carefully balanced obstacles are embedded in the situations of their lives: Catherine is a light-skinned Creole, Catholic, minimally educated, and untraveled beyond the local town; Jackson is black, Protestant or nothing, and returned from higher education in the West. An even larger barrier to their union appears almost at once. It is implied if not understandable that Jackson's growth need is to stay at least long enough to draw from his roots an inner freedom, to stop roaming, gain a purpose that includes the growth and freedom of others.

Catherine's psychic need, on the other hand, is to go, to break her father's hold and follow her heart to freedom. As the critic Travis David puts it, Jackson sees Catherine as his life and thinks he must escape with her to save it; Catherine sees Louisiana as her life and is trapped by her own feelings for it. Thus, if Jackson goes, it must be to act on a freely chosen purpose; if Catherine stays, it must be a choice made in the freedom of love. Each wants yet does not want both options: Jackson because he sees the plantation as a burial ground for the living yet knows California offers only a more understated racism and no clear goal for work, Catherine because she knows she is a prisoner of her parents' needs yet is emotionally bound by custom and compassion. Jackson thinks he cannot change the cultural limitations imposed by the whites and internalized by his people; Catherine knows she cannot prevent the coming drive of Cajun tractors over her father's land and pride.

Despite all the parallels and seeming equality of the two main characters, the novel could not quite stay on the balance wire (if, in fact, any novel can). Catherine may be seen first and may often be more vivid and compelling in her pain than Jackson, but from the moment Jackson gets off the bus, he predominates. He absorbs far more of the novel's space and concern than does Catherine; his internal conflict is more fully represented; his choice becomes the focus, at least until the final chapters. Catherine, though far more than a minor character, is not a true protagonist. Rather, she is "the first figure after the protagonist, the one most closely associated with [his] happiness or misery. . . ." (5). As such she requires fuller presentation than any lesser characters, and some of the novel's finest sections are devoted to her. But their very fineness helps create the imbalance that shows up in the problem areas of the novel, especially in its structure and viewpoint.

Yet another issue of coherence in the novel is its overall tone. Almost from the beginning it seems certain that no happy resolution is possible. Both lovers seem fated, he to drift, she to be her father's keeper. Consequently, some discussions of the novel speak of its plot, and especially its heroine, as tragic. Gaines had read widely in Greek tragedy and felt he had approximated elements of it in this novel. But if one may place the lovers up against the protagonists of classical tragedy, their fates do not rouse any such pity and terror. Nor does their story seem to fit the wider Victorian understanding of tragedy as "an action culminating in a disaster of great finality, affecting a person of high potential and destroying his or her ultimate hope of happiness or success" (48). The height of potential in both lovers is arguable. The ending leaves Jackson with the hope given by Della that Catherine will come to him, but even if she does not, his life is not yet a disaster. This novel is not a tragedy. It does, however, the reviewer Fit Sheldon Sacks's definition of a "serious action," a story with characters one may care about in unstable relationships whose shifting can be resolved, happily or unhappily. A "serious action" is not failed tragedy; its effect depends not on the force of inevitability but on ambiguity in the possible consequences of the characters' choices and the outcome need not be foreseeable or fixed until near the end" (51).

The Very Young Man's Book (1962) offers two questions for the critical readers: What seems to be Gaines's unreached intention, and what, certainly, is his achievement? Either approach calls for analysis of his deployment of a series of techniques: structure that parallels the two main characters and joins them in one struggle; controlled and measured interest in all the characters; selective use of viewpoint; a style spare enough to match their lean options, yet

not dull, especially not in dialogue; and an outcome that is either clearly resolved or meaningfully ambiguous. Such analysis and evaluation helps explain the outcome of the author's "reach."

Gaines has reported in numerous interviews that form and structure were his main concern as he rewrote *Catherine Carmier*, with Turgenev's "simple, small book," *Fathers and Sons*, as his "Bible" and mentor (60). If the focus of interest is to be on the possibilities of choice for young black people, then narrative structure must offer quick insight into the problem of Jackson and Catherine, their outer circumstances and inner dilemmas. From then on it must balance them in the reader's consciousness and concern in proportion to their importance, must offer further insight into their characters and situations; it must offer a sense of probable, if not inexorable, denouement. Gaines accomplishes this effectively yet imperfectly. One reader felt the lack of "quick in- sight":

"I found the early chapters of the book slow going. I was not relating to or sympathetic to any of the characters, simply because I did not quite know what their problem was or... its source. I needed more information... than I was getting." The problem is one of making the situation paramount without obscuring the characters (47).

To solve it, Gaines employs structure, first by dividing the novel into three parts. Part 1 (five chapters) first setup the situation and its psychosocial setting. At the store, where Jackson's return is discussed, racial prejudice is alive in storekeeper Claude's behavior: he ignores, delays, curses, and throws the mail at h land; farming for blacks is "all gone"; there is nothing for Jackson to come home black customer. For blacks, everything else is dying: the Cajuns are taking to; and as an educated black, he will be feared as one of "Them things there, Them demonstrate people." In the next three chapters, Catherine is seen barely heard, and then immediately merged back into her family's history, which illustrates the three kinds of racial conflict dominant in the novel: Creole versus landowning white (Robert Carmier versus Mack Grover), Creole versus black (the Carmiers versus their neighbours in the quarters), and Creole versus (the race to the derrick). This sight of Catherine before Jackson and the substantial account of her background establish her as a character of either equal or secondary importance to him. Chapter 5 then brings Jackson home to meet Catherine, with his Brother and Lillian as background. The immediate attraction is obvious: Lillian's interest in promoting it is hinted clearly, and Brother states to his friend the potential conflict with Raoul. The central issue is identified as this chapter ends: "Nobody has taken her from him yet?" "And nobody go'n do see it" (20).

The balancing of the two main characters is then forwarded by a four-chapter block on each of them. Chapters 6 through 9 set the trap for Jackson in his homecoming: his great-aunt believes that her prayers to have him back permanently have been answered, and she will never willingly let him go. These chapters end with Jackson's intent to leave. Chapters 10 through 13, on Lillian's homecoming, reveal the trap already clutching Catherine; Lillian's desire that Catherine leave with her is nullified by Catherine's compulsion to stay and her mother's willingness to sacrifice her, lest she now be "the one to hurt him" (59).

2. CONCLUSION

This precise balance of four-chapter blocks is tipped, however, by the nine chapters that complete part 1. They are solidly concerned with Jackson, his character and his questions, a focus required them to establish him and his plight solidly in the reader's awareness. These chapters also have a pattern. Again, the setting and situation are established first; before Jackson awakes, the people of the quarters come together and talk. The young men are thinking about leaving: "nothing but starving here." "But," object the older men, "where you go? What you do?" (61). These were the questions that Jackson must wrestle with. When he wakes and reluctantly joins the party in his honor, he is clearly "out of it," having no interest in the quarters' people, culture, or conversation; he is "as lost for words as they" (67). Only his old teacher, Madame Bayonne, can bring him out a little; she is now established as his mentor, his one source of full and accurate information and of realistic or moral outlook. After Madame Bayonne, Jackson converses directly with the two women who want to possess him, Mary Louise and Aunt Charlotte; to neither can he speak with satisfaction, for them or for himself. Into his non-conversation with Mary Louise is inserted his memory of racism in California, which, though painful, has disabled him for endurance of the worse variety in Louisiana.

Eventually, the conflict with his aunt is dramatized in their confrontation over his owning cards and disowning the church. Their previous loving relationship is then essentially at an end. Jackson sees himself as "dry, dead"; he is utterly alone, having effectively cut all possible relationships with blacks (102). He has no reason to stay in Louisiana-he thinks. As ends, two questions are left for the reader. Can Catherine be any part of Jackson's solution? And, structurally, will the next two parts create a balance of interest in Catherine by a similar in-depth exploration of her situation and dilemma.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

REFERENCES

- Gaines, Ernest, J. *Catherine Carmier*. New York: Knopf, 1983; New York: Vintage, 1984.
- -. "A Very Big Order: Reconstructing Identity." *The Southern Review* 26 (1990): 245-53.
- Auger, Philip. "A Lesson about Manhood: Appropriating 'The Word' in Ernest Gaines's Lesson." *Southern Literary Journal* 27 (1995): 74-85.
- Jeffers, Lance. Review of *Catherine Carmier*. *Black Scholar* 1984: 45-6. /Jones, Eldred Durosimi, ed. *Insiders and Outsiders*. Vol. 14 of *African Literature Today*. London: Heinemann, 1984.
- John Lowe, ed., *Conversations with Ernest Gaines Jackson*: University Press of Mississippi, 1995.
- Jones, Gayle. *Liberating Voices in Catherine Carmier: Oral Tradition in African American Literature*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991.
- Simpson, Anne K. *A Gathering of Gaines*. Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1991.
- Walker, Alice. Review of *A Gathering of Old Men*. *New Republic* (December 26, 1983): 38.
- Walker, Robbie. "Literary Art and Historical Reality: Ernest Gaines's Portrayal of the South in Transition." *Griot* 2 (summer 1983): 1-9.
- Ward, Phil. "Artistic Story Compels Quick Reading, Thought." *Baton Rouge Advocate Sunday Magazine*. October 30, 1983, 16